THE MYSTERY OF LOMBARDY CHAMBERS

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The Mystery of Lombardy Chambers

The Mystery of Lombardy Chambers

By STEVEN WESTLAW

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To
MADAME ——
WHO HAS SET
MANY FEET ON THE RIGHT TRACK
IN THE CITY
WHERE THIS TALE IS TOLD

2138715

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Chapter I

Eight Floors Up

QUEEN STREET, Melbourne, after six in the evening becomes practically deserted. There are no lighted shop windows, picture-shows, theatres, clubs, or even open hotels to keep people about. At the hour of 10 p.m., nothing but an occasional ghoul drifts slowly down the gloomy footpaths, or perhaps a late office-worker patters rapidly along in order to leave the sombre neighbourhood behind as soon as possible. The road traffic is negligible.

Far above the pavement, a square of light shone steadily from a front window in the tall Lombardy Chambers. Excepting for a wan street lamp it was the only patch of light in the whole dark block. Since dusk had fallen, some three hours previously, that window had been conspicuous among its neighbours.

In the room behind, absorbed in his lonely occupation, sat a young man. On the table before him—a neat, polished office table, with a tray of pigeon-holes in the same kind of wood as the desk—rested several piles of correspondence, and a number of small packets and articles, which might have been samples of merchandise.

Now and again, after a concentrated perusal of a paper, he dictated a concise letter into an office "Dictaphone" at his elbow; and now and again he affixed his signature—Ralph Harding—in a capable and firm hand to a document, placing the papers, as dealt with, into various divisions of the tray.

The desk calendar on the table showed Wednesday, 22nd October, 1925.

The room was a typical business sanctum, efficiently but not lavishly furnished. There were two doors, one leading to the outer office, and the other, in the wall at right angles to the first, direct into the public corridor outside. Its frosted glass top showed, in reverse:

PAYDON & HARDING
MERCANTILE BROKERS
Private.

Ralph Harding was "working back." Business at present was pretty brisk; and besides, he was keen to get on. He had a reason. He had several reasons in fact, but one, in particular, was a special one.

There was that look in his face, a certain expression in his eyes, and the set of his jaw that made it appear that when Harding set out to get a thing, though it might take a long while, he usually got it.

He was altogether a handsome fellow, with thick, shiny brown hair, broad brow, wide frank eyes, and a mouth that was firm and generous, although there were times when into its corners crept an expression of secretiveness that was foreign to the rest of his appearance. Presently, when he stood up to consult some papers in a filing cabinet which stood in a corner of the room, he displayed the square shoulders and the lithe form of an athlete.

Faintly, on the still warm air, came the slow strokes of the Post Office clock. It was ten o'clock striking.

Mechanically, as men will do, Harding glanced at his watch.

For the first time since his occupancy of the office that night he became suddenly aware of the sense of his loneness in that vast building. He was eight stories up and, so far as he knew, there was not another soul in Lombardy Chambers. The janitor, who only waited in the building until the cleaners had gone home, must have left by now. Only once before had he been back in the office at night alone, and then he had cleared out much before this. He was a long way from the street.

In the deathly silence he could distinctly hear his watch ticking in his pocket.

Suddenly, with startling effect, the telephone bell rang out.

Ralph never knew he had nerves before, but such may be the insidious influence of tense and unusual surroundings that those little slumbering threads of torture can leap into red-hot jagging life when least expected.

Ralph jumped like one who had been stung. The next second, cursing himself inwardly for his weakness, he picked up the receiver.

" Hullo ! " he called.

" Hullo—is that you, Ralph ? " A beautifully modulated, contralto voice was speaking. It was a voice which Ralph had learned to love. But then he loved everything about Diana Allison.

" Yes, dear," he replied. " By Jove, but you gave me a start."

" Did I, Ralph ? I am so sorry if I disturbed you. Your voice sounds a little—surprised."

" It's a funny thing, I was so absolutely lost in contemplation, or something, that when the 'phone rang it was like a revolver shot going off, almost. It's so quiet here. It—I have never felt quite like it before. You just rang at the psychological moment."

A musical laugh floated over the telephone.

" That almost sounds as if I had caught you in a moment of temptation," came cheerily. " I do hope, Ralph, you haven't got that obnoxious fair-haired typist back with you to-night. Oh, you use a Dictaphone ? Whatever's that ? . . . I see . . . . God bless the man who invented Dictaphones, so saith a woman. Ralph, I'm ringing up from the Fiseleys' place ; their party is still going strong—at least, it has hardly got started yet. I am so sorry you begged off coming, and went to your office. I'm almost lonely here without you. Of course, Cyril Clarke is doing his best."

" Cyril Clarke, is he there ? "

" Of course, dear boy. But don't be alarmed. This is his dance, but I asked to be excused, saying I had an important telephone message to deliver at ten o'clock. Of course, it is important ringing you up, isn't it ? "

" Not only that, but highly commendable if it gets you out of a dance with that fellow Clarke."

" Now, don't be too hard on Cyril, Ralph. He's—only for you—well, he's not such a bad chap when you know him."

" Well, of course, I don't know him as you do, Dee," said Ralph, a trifle bitterly.

" Now, don't be silly ! But we are getting away from—the important point. Ralph, are you lonely too, up there ? "

" I shall be when you ring off, Dee. Until I can bury myself in my work again. That's most important."

" Surely you are not going to work on much longer ! "

" Oh, for about an hour or so. You see——"

" I was wondering, Ralph, if you would like a couple of visitors ? "

" Visitors ? Up here ? No ! But why ? "

" Oh, to tell you the truth, things are just a trifle slow at present—Cyril Clarke is about the most exciting man here—and I was formulating a bright little scheme whereby two or three of us could come along in Hal Roach's car, and bring you some refreshments. Then perhaps we could drag you back to the Fiseleys' place with us. Things will keep going till about one. A few of the folk off ' His Majesty's ' will be coming after the theatres are out."

" Sorry, Dee—but if I had such charming visitors to my office, what would be the use of my working back ? I wouldn't get anything done. Besides, I'll be out of town all to-morrow —that's why I came here to-night, and I'm catching a train from Spencer Street at six o'clock. Under the circs, I couldn't go jazzing off to the Fiseleys. I must arise early with a clear brain to-morrow."

There was a slight pause, during which Ralph distinctly heard the opening bars of a popular fox-trot come through the receiver. Then :

" All right, my man of iron. If you won't, you won't. There goes the next dance, and I must have this one. It's with Cyril Clarke, too—no, it's not! Good-bye-e-e-e. I shall expect you on Friday."

"Good night—temptress!" and Ralph hung up the receiver.

No sooner was the conversation finished, than the strange feeling of loneliness overcame him again. While he was speaking, Ralph Harding could visualize the warmth and gaiety in the palatial home from which Diana Allison had been speaking. He himself had on many occasions enjoyed the lavish hospitality of the Fiseley family, and though not nearly so well blessed with the world's gifts himself, had always been held by them as an equal. He had gone to the same college as Jack Fiseley, and in his schoolboy days had once been twitted with being Madge Fiseley's "boy." This imputation, however, he stoutly resented.

With an effort, Ralph recaptured his powers of concentration; and for the next three-quarters of an hour nothing but the rustle of papers, or the occasional drone into the Dictaphone, broke the heavy silence.

Then, as once again the distant Post Office clock struck, he swung back in his chair.

"That's about the lot," he muttered, thoughtfully pulling at the lobe of his left ear, a mannerism of his.

After scribbling one or two notes in pencil on a pad, he prepared to leave.

A few yards along the corridor outside was the lift-well. This was indicated by a low power electric bulb which gave forth but a faint light.

Ralph's footsteps echoed eerily on the stone floor of the passage. He paused half-way to the lift, thinking he heard a sound down below. There was nothing but the ticking of his watch.

"Nerves again," he thought. "I'll be glad to be out of this. Been working too hard lately."

A cold breath of air from somewhere blew on his face. He hastened forward.

The ascent of the automatic lift seemed to take minutes. Ralph started to whistle a fragment of the fox-trot he had heard over the telephone.

At last the cage came to rest opposite him with a click and a shudder; swinging the door open, he stepped in.

As he pressed the button for the ground floor something knocked his foot. He looked downwards, and gave vent to an involuntary cry of horror.

Lying on the floor of the slowly descending lift, with ghastly face upstaring, lay the inert ody of a man clad in immaculate evening dress. An ugly red stain showed on the left side of his polished shirt, from the centre of which, even in that dim light, a brilliant diamond sparkled!

Chapter II *The Fiseleys Entertain*

BRIGHTNESS and gaiety seemed part of the atmosphere in the spacious home of Mrs. Ruckhart Fiseley. Mr. Ruckhart Fiseley also resided at "Glenora," Toorak, but—although, per medium of his extensive business undertakings, he supplied the wherewithal for the costly menage and house of entertainment—he rarely participated in the festivities which so frequently took part there, and it was his estimable wife who invariably got the publicity attached to such functions in the society papers.

Mrs. Fiseley, a handsome, rather effusive woman in the later forties, loved such publicity; but even more so did she love to see her two children, Jack and Madge, enjoying themselves with a crowd of young people about them. It was just this little tinge of over-geniality which made her at times tend to force matters, and if occasionally her entertainments went slightly flat, it was because she had not left quite enough freedom of movement to her guests.

But although on this particular night Diana Allison had told Ralph Harding over the telephone that things were a bit slow, others were not finding it so. There were many young couples who considered the ballroom and grounds held wondrous attractions that night.

Perhaps it was because Diana had only recently discovered that Ralph Harding was different from other young men, and took a strange delight in contemplating the fact, that events from which he was absent seemed robbed of some of their glamour.

As she left the little alcove of the wide hall where the telephone was placed, a young man, who had been smoking a cigarette a few yards away, with an air of great boredom, joined her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Cyril," she smiled at him, "but my message *had* to be delivered. We'll be just in time for the next dance."

Cyril Clarke, dapper and comfortable young-man-about-town, for once did not look very pleased with himself.

"You seem to be giving that Harding chap an importance which—er—I hope he appreciates," he growled, as they moved off.

Diana's thin black eyebrows contracted a trifle, and her expressive eyes took a shade of annoyance. A glint of fire flashed from their dark depths.

"It is really not your concern, Cyril, whom I am interested in——"

"I want it to be, Diana. You ought to know that."

"And to think that you—how did you know I was speaking to Ralph Harding?"

Clarke answered glibly:

"I didn't know. I just guessed. Call it telepathy, if you like; our minds must be in tune——"

"Oh, don't talk rot! Cyril, you weren't *listening*?"

"Of course not, my dear girl. You saw where I was, over by the palm-stand at the doorway. How could I hear from there? I just guessed."

In a rather strained silence the two descended the wide steps that led down from the front entrance of the house, and made for the ball-room, which was a specially constructed building standing apart in the grounds from the rest of the establishment. To-night, with casement windows flung wide, ablaze with light, it presented a fairy picture.

As the young couple entered the little foyer of the dancing-room, where cloaks and wraps were left on the chairs and lounges so plentifully provided, they were met by a cheerful-looking fellow who at once claimed Diana as partner. The floor was already rather full.

" What, have you been sitting out ? " he exclaimed banteringly, with a smiling glance towards Cyril Clarke. " I can see, Diana, that I shall have to look after you when poor old Ralph isn't with us ! "

At the mention of the latter's name, Clarke frowned, pinching the end of his little black moustache petulantly. But he said nothing.

Diana laughed.

" Oh, it's not as serious as it looked, Hal," she cried with a return of her gay manner, " but if I ever need such guidance I am sure that Ralph would prefer your efforts to anyone else's."

With that, they stepped off lightly into the fox-trot.

Of all the girls in that brilliant assembly, Diana Allison was perhaps the most striking. Her tall, lithe body was surmounted by a neck and shoulders of surpassing fairness. Dark masses of blue-black hair had been exquisitely " shingled," until it lent the creamy beauty of her skin a touch of wonder.

Her mouth was a study in red and white, but her eyes—as more than one man had told her—held many colours. Perhaps no man could ever correctly gauge them, but the promise of unnumbered emotions shone deep within them, while the thrilling augury of passion, as yet held tightly leashed, trembled in the warm curves of her lips.

Diana Allison, in the glory of her twenty-two years, was a girl to bring unrest into most men's minds ; but to Ralph Harding, previously considered rather a careless devil, she brought something truer and finer, and yet more stirring —inspiration. She had long been thought too flighty and gay to have any serious affairs of the heart—serious on her side, that is. But now several people knew their secret.

They were to be officially engaged in November.

Hal Roach, as one of the lucky man's oldest friends, was amongst the privileged few to be informed of that secret. Though he greatly liked and admired the light-footed girl with whom he was dancing, there were times—not very often, it is true—when he had little doubts, doubts whether Diana, the gay and popular, was quite good enough for Ralph. He himself was of the butterfly order. For him life was little more than a happy playground with a few thrilling but not very dangerous adventures ; but for Ralph, with his way to make in the world, it was a much more serious thing. He was the best of fellows, and Hal admired him immensely. Ralph deserved all the best himself, and his life's partner (thought Hal) should be one that was absolutely—*dependable*, was the best word he could find.

His was the true loyalty of friendship.

No disturbing thoughts entered Hal's mind, however, as he danced to-night. As a matter of fact, he was not of the sort that permits gloom to hold sway for very long, and as they zigzagged amongst the brightly dressed throng, he chattered gaily.

He and Jack Fiseley had been to some races that afternoon, and had picked a couple of winners.

Consequently Hal was in rather happy form. Nothing ever depressed him much, but little things like his win that day (coupled with the necessary celebration of the event afterwards) often elevated him.

" If Cyril Clarke had kept me waiting for you much longer," he commenced, " I'd have felt jealous—jealous by proxy, so to speak."

Diana raised her eyebrows in amused inquiry.

" I mean, that is to say, I would have felt jealous on Ralph's behalf," Hal persisted. " Must support my pal's feelings in his absence, you know."

" And don't you feel jealous or anything on your own behalf ? " asked Diana tantalizingly.

" Of course I feel—robbed. You see, we'd have been able to have had at least another half-revolution of the floor in this dance, and fox-trotting with you is like——"

" Like what ? "

"Whatever Ralph says it is. But say, old sport, why isn't he with us to-night—business?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I have just been ringing him up at his office. That's what kept me away from here. I wanted to find out if he were lonely."

"Surely you do not think he could be otherwise? I know I——"

"I had a passing fancy that it would be a bright notion for a few of us to slip by in a car, and pay him a visit. Take him some refreshments, perhaps; and bring him back here."

"Great Castanets! That sounds sound. He has no right to be stuck in his old office at this indecent hour, while we are all here."

"But he—repulsed my suggestion, Hal. He is too busy to-night to be interrupted by frivolous matters."

"Is he, by clangers! If he won't join the revels under conditions like that, we jolly well ought to make him."

"He's got to get up in the morning——"

"Has he? That's funny, so have I; I do so frequently. If he was my girl—I mean——"

From behind the red barriers of her lips, the white of Diana's teeth flashed in a smile.

"I am afraid, even if you were his boy, Hal, he wouldn't come for you to-night."

"Oh, wouldn't he?" retorted Hal, his sport-ing instincts aroused. "Well, my car is all ready outside, and we'll see whether Jack Fiseley and myself can't—overpower him. It'll do him good to have his cold-and-efficient-business-man attitude taken out of him for once. He *must* come."

"All right," laughed the girl, seeing that she had touched the rather wild streak in the other's nature, and knowing that it would be useless now to attempt to dissuade him from his mad purpose. "Try if you like. But he won't come."

"We'll bring him to you," replied the other, with mock gallantry, "and make him apologize to you for staying away so long."

The strains of the music died. There was no encore. It was the supper dance, and already the floor was emptying rapidly. Supper-room arrangements were sometimes a little congested at "Glenora," and the guests knew this.

It was a happy throng that pushed their way under the purple and gold decorations of the big room. Diana did her best to steer Hal Roach clear of Jack Fiseley in the crush. If she could keep these two wild spirits apart, perhaps Ralph would be left undisturbed. Although the general idea of the excursion to the latter's office had been her own, now that she knew his desires she had no deliberate wish to thwart them. Though she had been a girl rather keen on escapades herself, she did not see what benefit there could be in this.

As luck would have it, no sooner had Hal seated her at a secluded little table in a corner than there was a familiar laugh of greeting and Jack Fiseley announced himself. By his appearance, he had been celebrating to more effect than his co-winner at the races, and his manner, always a trifle loud, was verging on the blatant.

" Miss Diana Allison, Miss Phyllis Martel," he announced, holding back a chair for his partner. " Oh, of course you know each other. Stupid of me. May we sit here ? Thank you. Had your fortune told lately, Di ? Not yet ? Hal, old top, how are you since I saw you last ? "

Five minutes later, Diana knew that the damage was done. Hal Roach had engaged his friend in close and giggling confab.

Well, never mind, thought she, after they had left in the car for Queen Street—which, she gathered, would be immediately after supper—she would be able to ring up Ralph again and warn him of the possible intrusion. Then she would have done her duty.

Diana would have plenty of time for doing this. Jack Fiseley had booked the following dance with her.

RALPH HARDING, as soon as he realized that he was alone in the lift with a lifeless body, acted on a quick instinct. His hand shot out and pressed the " stop " button.

He subconsciously felt that to pass floor after floor of that gloomy building with this grisly and repellent companion, would be a horror and an outrage. He wanted to arrest motion.

The elevator jerked into silence. A swift sense of unreality swept over Ralph. He felt that this was the prælidium to the climax of a horrible dream, one that he must fight his way out of.

But something held him fascinated. It was the merciless glitter of the big diamond stud in the stained shirt-front. It was like the cold eye of evil which shone the brighter in the presence of tragedy.

With a gasp, Ralph realized that something must be done. Haltingly, he stooped to feel if life still fluttered in the recumbent form, though the very air seemed surcharged with death. Suddenly the empty stillness of the place was shattered into fragments. Somewhere near a telephone had commenced a violent ringing. Startled echoes went scurrying hither and thither throughout the deserted building.

Ralph Harding jerked himself upright. The unexpected sound seemed strangely loud and insistent. His nerves were terribly jarred.

The lift was stuck half-way between the top and the seventh floors. The ringing appeared to come from Ralph's own office. He would see. The whole effect was eery.

As the gate clanged behind him, there was a fresh burst of ringing. He hastened along the haunted corridor. Death lay behind him ; in front, in the familiar warmth of his office, came a call from the outside world that seemed now so strangely remote.

He fumbled nearly half a minute with his key. The strident note of the bell had ceased.

Now, as he rushed to the receiver, even the sane atmosphere of the room of business seemed somehow to be different. The all-pervading spirit of tragedy seemed to have preceded him, filling the place with subtle breaths of fearful expectancy.

" Hullo ! " he called. " Hullo ! "

There was no response.

He rattled the receiver.

" Hullo ! " once more. " Who's there ? "

There was a faint buzzing over the line ; that was all.

With the instrument to his ear, Ralph gazed around the room breathlessly. He could not be mistaken as to whence the call had come. He was sure it was not on any other telephone.

Anyhow, he would raise the exchange and ask. Exchange took a long time in raising.

He rattled the receiver-arm again, with quick, nervous jabs of his fingers. When he did get Central, he would ask for the police. That's what he should do. He should get the police along as quickly as possible. This might mean having to put off his trip to-morrow; that was considerably awkward, as the mission he was undertaking was a particularly important one. No, if possible, he must get all his questioning over to-night.

Rattle, rattle went the receiver.

He was sorry now he had not gone to the Fiseleys that night; or even let Diana send along a couple of her restless friends. He might have missed this affair then. He was a bit too punctilious over his work, perhaps. Of course, his partner, Paydon, was in Sydney, and he simply had to attend to everything himself.

His momentary tinge of something like self-pity passed, as did all emotions foreign to Ralph's nature, rapidly. His jabs at the instrument became more deliberate.

There was no response at all. Even the faint buzzing had ceased. The line was dead.

Slowly Ralph rose to his feet, replacing the receiver. There was no other telephone that he could reach in the building. All the others were behind locked doors.

All that remained was to return to the elevator. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter-past eleven.

Under the dull dusty lamp down the passage, Ralph gave a gasp of dismay. The lift-well was empty. The cage, with its grisly contents, had descended into the gloomy depths during his absence.

How? He listened. He could hear no sound, except what he took for the throb of a motor passing in the street below. Was there somebody else in the building then? Somebody else who like himself had innocently pressed the lift button? Or would it be the victim's aggressors? Neither case seemed very likely, especially the latter. Surely nobody would want to recall a corpse like that, once it had been snatched from view. Perhaps the lift was so designed as to return to the bottom floor, by itself. He did not know much about the properties of automatic elevators. But probably that was what had happened.

Almost without knowing what he was doing, Ralph pressed the elevator-button. Even as he did so, he regretted his action. A feeling of dread stole over him. Why should he choose this way of returning to the ground floor? A lift with an unknown dead man as companion in a lonely building at dead of night—the ordeal was too much. He withdrew his finger from the button as quickly as if it had been charged with high-tension electricity.

Thoughts were now racing through his mind. The first feeling of shock was over, and, while he was in no sense lost to the lurking weirdness and terror of his position, he had to some extent collected himself. If no further surprises happened he would soon be master of his actions.

Nothing stirred. The wan light of the low-powered bulb showed the intent lines on Ralph's face. The pit before him was impenetrably black.

Down at the bottom of the long flights of stairs, on the ground floor, he knew, was the only other light in Lombardy Chambers, which was indeed a bright one. Tenants coming into the building at night were expected to switch off any lights that they had used. The janitor had left this one on for him.

To go out of the building the way he intended, Ralph would have to pass the brilliantly illuminated lift cage, with its horrible contents. Somehow, he did not feel equal to running the gauntlet, as it were, after descending the dark flights of stairs. It would be a good idea to bring the lift up after all, and pass it on his way downstairs. Then he could go on undistracted into the street, and so make straight for the police.

Afterwards, in analysing his own actions, some of his promptings that night seemed queer to Ralph Harding; but it must be remembered that his nerves in the first place were ragged from over-work, and the overwhelming nature of the circumstances, and the environment surrounding them were naturally rather aberrant in their effects.

He pressed the button a second time. This time he held his finger firm, waiting for the steel ropes in the lift-well to move.

They did not move. There was no distant click of the cage, in commencing an upward journey. There was no sound at all.

Ralph's thoughts flew to the telephone in his office. It was dead. Now the lift, too, was dead. He shivered.

Then upwards through the darkness came a sound. A horrible, blood-curdling sound. It was like a man's laugh—a distorted, cackling expression of glee—but in it was no tinge of mirth or goodwill, only the glee of satiated lust, or revenge, or loathing. Demoniacal it seemed, hideous, scoffing, brutishly merciless.

Twice it was repeated. Ralph felt horror trickle down his spine. He had a sudden unaccountable recollection of a tale told to him in his early boyhood by a foolish nurse—a tale of a blood-sucking vampire, and its clammy victim at dead of night.

Then he plunged into instant action. At the far end of the building was another stairway, which served an exit higher up the street. A long corridor separated them. Recking not of noise or darkness, he ran for this. His footsteps beat like sharp hammer-blows.

There was a liftway there, too, but this did not trouble him. Down the pitch-black steps he rushed. Two or three times he stumbled, and only recovered through the force of his own momentum. Once he collided slantingly with the end of a balustrade, but with a huge gasp got back the breath he had lost.

At the doorway he fumbled—struck a match. Perhaps, after all, this way would be barred.

Ah ! Here was a little trap-door cut in one of the huge double members. It was held shut by a Yale spring lock. It could be opened from the inside.

A moment later Ralph was out in the street.

Chapter IV *Anti-Climax*

IT is not often, if ever, that an anti-climax occurs at the beginning of a story. Yet such was the peculiar nature of the events which had so startled Ralph Harding that it gave rise to this apparent paradox.

There are some who contend that such a precedence could not occur. But Ralph Harding, who was a very intelligent young man, in reviewing matters the next day was quite satisfied—in fact, it even afforded him some delight in contemplating it—that an anti-climax had arrived. Anti-climaxes are usually such unsatisfactory things ; but this one pleased Ralph considerably in the main.

But then Ralph did not know that this stage was only the beginning of the story and that his anti-climax was not the completion of events. So perhaps, after all, our other friends are right.

As he lounged comfortably back in the cushions of a first-class smoking compartment, Ralph drew slowly at an excellent cigar. Smoking was perhaps his one vice, and he treated it luxuriously.

His unnerving experience of the night before had not prevented him catching his train as intended, and he was now well on his way towards Dalesbrook. Outside, the smoothly passing country glowed with appreciation under a warm spring sun.

The only cloud in Ralph's skies was a little apprehension regarding the mission in front of him, for it was one in which great delicacy and tact would probably be required. The ghastly effect of his lonely ordeal in Lombardy Chambers had passed, leaving mingled feelings of relief and satisfaction, with a tinge of resentment.

The whole thing had been an elaborate and thoughtless hoax on the part of those two wild spirits, Hal Roach and Jack Fiseley. It was the sort of thing they specialized in. They had no real business with which to occupy their minds. It was a most stupid thing for them to do, one which might have had dangerous consequences, but no doubt the bright pair were pretty elevated as they often became about that time in the evening when they were together.

Whoever the " corpse " was, Ralph did not know. He had never seen the man before, to his knowledge, although the impression Ralph retained was of a rather striking face. It was dark and handsome, for all its imagined or simulated pallor ; there was a suggestion of foreign blood in it. Ralph reckoned he was a fellow in his late thirties, a little too old to be playing pranks of that kind. No doubt, however for reasons of social advantage, probably—he was only too willing to curry favour with the sons of such noted families as those of the two practical jokers.

Hence he had consented to play the part of a murdered stranger, after ruining a dress shirt with black coffee.

Somehow or other they had deadened the

telephone line—probably by promising rich reward in the shape of chocolates or stockings to a girl on the Exchange. Jack Fiseley had "girl friends" in all classes of the community. Nobody was more democratic than he as regards his relations with the opposite sex—provided that they were good-looking.

That cackling laugh which had so filled him with fright—Ralph could hear it now—was nothing but a half-drunken paroxysm. Probably it had been intended to scare him. Anyhow, that part of their scheme had been successful.

What afforded Ralph satisfaction was the thought that the others had never known the effect of their joke upon him. His escape by the other exit had robbed them of that knowledge. No doubt, they had kept the door of the lift open on the ground floor, to prevent it rising when he rang for it, and the ambush they had probably prepared for him as he came down the stairs was never walked into.

Ralph smiled a bit at this. He wondered how long they had lingered about the doorway waiting for him. No doubt they were still puzzling over where he had disappeared. He felt morally certain that they could not have heard his foot-beats as he raced along the top corridor. Sound in those buildings always rises.

Ralph wondered now why he did not "tumble" to the fact that it was all a hoax earlier than he did. The first ring on the telephone, and the hint that visitors might be coming, should have put him on his guard. It was not until he reached the calmness and openness of the street that his thoughts became really collected. The cool air on his brow acted as a swift tonic.

The first thing he had noticed at the main doorway of the building was a big motor-car. It was a mass of lights, and its appearance was familiar. Ralph checked his haste, and passed down that way, keeping to the middle of the road.

It was Hal Roach's "Lancia."

That was the first thing that really suggested hoax to his mind. Even then, his desire for help was so strong that he was about to rush forward and claim assistance in dealing with the horror within, when there was a movement on the stone steps before the doorway. A bright light shone through the open fanlight above.

Ralph heard Jack Fiseley's voice, thick, yet distinctly audible.

"We'll shake the old blighter up properly this time, Hal, eh?"

A bibulous chuckle preceded the response.

"We'll make him sorry he didn't come when he was called, by Zifs. Listen, old sport——"

Ralph waited to hear no more. He thought he heard a third voice join in as he left, but it seemed muffled and further away.

He had seen his two friends in this mood before. In a flash he was quite satisfied that they had engineered the whole thing, and were contemplating a still more violent form of scare. He left them to it. Congratulating himself silently, he passed on.

His sleep was untroubled, and, in spite of his short sojourn in bed, he was quite fresh when he stepped into the train at 6 a.m.

He would find some way later of getting his own back on his two mischievous friends. In the meantime, he hoped that the police had apprehended them for riotous behaviour. They were beginning to get a little rowdy when he saw—or rather, heard, them last.

The train slid into a refreshment station. Ralph strolled out and ordered a glass of whisky at the bar. He indulged in a silent toast. It referred to a speedy revenge for the death of the man in the lift.

* * * * *

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the train pulled up at Dalesbrook. Carrying his little attaché-case, Ralph went straight across to the Great Western Hotel, which was the most pretentious of the three or four hostelries in the town.

There he inquired for a " Mrs. Lensker," and, being informed that no one of that name had yet arrived, he left his attaché-case with the manager, saying he was going for a short stroll around the town.

" I was to meet Mrs. Lensker here, and have lunch with her," he added, " but she probably will not come until a little after midday. You might reserve a small separate table for us, as we have to talk business. Should she arrive before I get back, please make her comfortable in the lounge. I shall not be longer than an hour. My name is Harding," and Ralph handed the manager a card.

" Is that Mrs. Lensker from Camlot Springs ? " asked the latter.

" Yes, that is so. She will probably come in by car."

" We know her here, and we shall fix you up all right," replied the manager, with an air of mild importance.

Dalesbrook was a fair-sized place, as Victorian country towns go. That is to say, it had several streets with shops in them, a number of hotels —all, except what was hoped to be the irreducible minimum, now delicensed, however—and a couple of solid, if not extensive, public buildings.

Once the district had been humming with activity. That was years ago, when the goldfields were at their best. But now the broken and scarred poppet-heads which shot up here and there, on the surrounding hills, were silent and deserted. Most of the mines which had made the place famous amongst capitalists and investors, and even amongst more humble seekers after wealth, had closed down long since, but one or two shafts were still being worked, and there were optimistic spirits who yet hoped that another rich reef would be struck.

As the town dwindled, with passing of the mining operations, another source of wealth was discovered. This was the mineral springs, several of which were found from time to time in different parts of the district. The waters had various properties : that of restoring people's health, which perhaps was rather problematical ; that of turning whisky black, which was curious but certainly a fact ; and that of bringing tourists to the place in large numbers, which was by far the most satisfactory property of the three.

Dalesbrook was now a thriving holiday resort, with boarding-houses and homes-from-home in all sorts of corners, and at any distance up to five miles from the brick-and-blue-stone Post Office.

It pursued a prosperous but parasitical existence on the rest of the community. And although it did not hum with the activity—too often futile—of the older days, it clinked with the cash so easily obtained from town visitors.

Ralph Harding had only been to Dalesbrook once before, some years previously, and then but to spend a week-end, so that his hour's stroll was interesting enough. The chief things that struck him about the place were that most of the wooden buildings were greatly in need of paint, and how clean the gutters were.

Punctually at twelve o'clock he was back at the hotel. Mrs. Lensker had not arrived.

He busied himself in the lounge with the contents of his attaché-case—mostly papers.

At one o'clock there was still no sign of the person he had come to see. Ralph waited a little longer, then sought the manager.

"You know Mrs. Lensker?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Pretty little woman. Often thought——"

"Do you know if her house is on the telephone?"

"I really don't know. Here is a book. Under 'Camlot Springs' it would be."

While the other rustled the leaves, Ralph frowned a trifle impatiently.

"No, it's not here," said the former at last. "There are only nine numbers on that Exchange and hers is not one of them. I don't know if you could get a message that way to the Lenskers; it's only a new place, you know, and is built a good distance from any other house. Funny, I was out through there in young Simmonds's car last Sunday. I don't know which of these people"—tapping the open page of the Directory—"lives nearest to them, anyway."

"H'm!" mused Ralph, "it's strange. I

don't think J—Mrs. Lensker could have mistaken the day. I am an agent of hers in Melbourne, you see, and I came down to discuss some important business here with her to-day."

Ralph felt that some sort of explanation as to the reason for his appointment was necessary. In these small towns it is often wise to forestall speculation. The manager struck him as being just the sort of curious-minded man who would love to make a mouthful with his scandal-starved associates about this private meeting of the young man from the city, and Mrs. Lensker from Camlot Springs—" that pretty little woman."

He went on :

" Perhaps, however, she has mistaken the time. I shall not have my lunch just yet. I'll wait a little longer."

" Wouldn't advise you to wait after two," recommended the other. " Nothing's kept hot after then."

Ralph smiled faintly.

" All right," he said, " I won't. By then I might be able to eat both the dinners I ordered."

However, it was with comparatively little appetite that he finally sat down. He lingered unduly over the repast, and by the time he left the dining-room—somewhat to the regret of a lonely waitress who had hoped that he had stayed behind because of her bold good looks—it was nearly a quarter to three.

The train he must catch back to the city left at half-past four.

Under the cool front verandah, facing the dusty world outside, Ralph ran into the manager again. He had discovered that the latter's name was Best.

" No sign of her yet," he announced, seeing Ralph. " Possibly she's had a breakdown in her car."

" How far out is this Camlot Springs ? " asked the other.

" Nine miles, if you take the Castlehill road; I believe it's a bit shorter if you go through Bongwap, but the track's very rough. Are you thinking of going there ? "

There was a tone almost of disappointment in the manager's last question. It seemed as if this young man were willing to visit Mrs. Lensker in the presence of her husband, which he presumably would do if he went to Camlot Springs—there was nothing clandestine in this appointment at the hotel at all. He passed a hand over the already flattened wisps of black hair on his scalp, while Ralph was replying.

" Well, I was thinking of going out," he said slowly, " but I doubt if there would be sufficient time now. For fixing up all the business, I mean. You see, I've got to be back at the station before half-past four, and by the time I can get hold of a trap or something——"

"You'd never have time if you went by a jinker."

"What about cars?—any garages here? Let's see. Nine miles, and the road's rough."

"Most of the cars here run on regular trips. Williams might be able to take you."

"Where's Williams?"

"Just around the corner. That big galvanized building. You can see the back of it from here. Just slip across. It would be easier, better than 'phoning from here. Sometimes he leaves his receiver off the hook, anyway."

Without his hat, Ralph "slipped across."

Mr. Williams, the proprietor of "The Elite Livery Stables—Cars for Hire," was a large hairy man, with a perpetual frown on his face caused by much driving along blinding white roads.

Ralph was unlucky. Both cars were out for the afternoon. One had gone to Glenlyall with a party of picnickers; and the other was down at White Flat races. Perhaps Scobie could fix him up.

Ralph did not trouble Mr. Scobie. Time was getting too short, and anyhow his post was at the Great Western Hotel. It was for there that the appointment was made. He was not going to complicate matters.

Armed with a magazine and a good cigar, he made himself comfortable on the lounge-chair beside a bucket palm on the verandah. He faced a long stretch of white road which ran between the station and the hotel, past a few shops, away down a long slope and over a hill where a big belt of saplings grew wide. What had been an unsightly trailing heap near the crest of the rise was now almost concealed behind the tender new branches.

There was very little traffic on the road. Ralph became immersed in a story. Only once was he disturbed. With open exhaust, a large touring car burst blatantly out of the quiet. Ralph looked up as, with a high-ascending tail of dust, it came up the slope towards the Great Western.

The hood was up, and the side curtains were down. Ralph thought, had he been a passenger, he would have preferred a little dust to the extra heat. Evidently, however, the car contained a mixed company of revellers, who did not wish the world—even the world of trees, and birds, and open fields—to witness their form of travelling entertainment. Ralph had time to hear a series of small screeches, precisely suggestive of a girl or girls being tickled, more forcibly than distastefully—and a heavy, penetrating, masculine chuckle.

Then the car passed on down the Melbourne road.

Odd, it seemed, but as Ralph returned to his story he was reminded of that unnerving cackle which he had heard the night before in the loneliness of Lombardy Chambers.

That was one thing that those two scallawags, Jack Fiseley and Hal Roach, might claim as a bit of an achievement. They—or one of them—had at least produced in that ghoulish laugh an effect which left a lasting impression on Ralph's mind.

Chapter V *The Woman who Read People*

DIANA ALLISON, full of the zest of life, was a creature of many impulses. When dreamy-eyed Phyllis Martel a few days previously had suggested a visit to her favourite fortune-teller, Diana was greatly taken with the idea.

The languorous Phyllis, in spite of her worldly wisdom and her skill in the art of sex, took these occult adventurings very seriously. To Diana it was just a new experience, one to be undertaken with a light heart and an open mind. Of late, the world to her seemed a more delightful place than ever. This fortune-telling business should be great fun. She would tell Ralph all about it afterwards. Perhaps Madame Astra would warn her against brown-haired young men, with firm jaws and *lovable* intelligent eyes. She hugged herself at the idea.

Phyllis had arranged for the " reading " to be given on the day after the ball at " Glenora."

Four o'clock in the afternoon found them seeking admission to Madame's chambers. These were located in a handsome building at the eastern end of Collins Street, and were one floor above a popular modiste's.

" Just fancy," said Diana. " I have often been to ' Aline et Cie's ' before, but I never imagined that there was an abode of mystery and wonder situated so close. . . . Perhaps that is why Aline makes such wonderfully heavenly gowns."

" Don't make fun of it," replied Phyllis, a trifle peevishly. " You'll be surprised after you have seen Madame."

The door swung open, and the two girls were ushered into a large plainly furnished lounge. The trim maid who had attended them neither inquired their names nor business, but disappeared silently through the central of the three other doorways in the room. A bead curtain swung before this.

There was no real touch of mystery or suggestion so far. Big vases of fresh gum-leaves on pedestals here and there; while on a central table a huge bowl of purple rhododendron blossoms helped to distract attention from the simple nature of the other decorations. Except for the number of doorways, the place was very like the waiting-room of an ordinarily successful middle-class doctor.

There were, at the time, no other clients in the room.

Presently there was a rustling of the bead curtains opposite and Diana was conscious of a pair of exceptionally keen eyes regarding her. Madame Astra was standing there.

"Do you wish to—consult with me?"

The woman of the Occult spoke in a quaint, jerky manner. Her voice held a foreign intonation.

Phyllis Martel touched Diana lightly on the arm.

"Go on, Di, you go first," she whispered.

Diana rose, and made her way across the room. After favouring her with another keen glance, Madame stepped forward, and opened the door on the right of the one where she had been standing.

With a faint flutter of excitement the girl entered the room beyond.

The interior caused some surprise. Save for two cane chairs and a small deal table, the room was completely bare. No covering of any kind concealed the unstained boards of the floor, while the drab-tinted walls were guiltless of any hanging or decoration. A frosted window facing a light-well was the sole means of illumination.

Madame had evidently been noting the effect of the unexpected surroundings on Diana's countenance.

" Oh, my dear," she smiled, closing the door softly behind her, " you are so—so vivid yourself. That is why I bring you here. I have another room for the poor ladies. And the pale ladies."

The little soothsayer was a woman whose age was hard to judge. She was probably about forty; her hair was as black as a raven's, and there was scarcely a line on her plump, rounded face.

Her eyes were little darting points of light, and as she held Diana's hand—after the two had seated themselves in the cane chairs by the table—they kept flicking here and there about Diana's person as if the very brilliance of their look would expose any secrets however darkly concealed.

Diana felt slightly uncomfortable. Madame was taking a long time to begin. She wondered if this were usual.

At last, with almost a casual glance at the lines on the hand she held, the little woman lowered her lids over a gaze which still rested softly on Diana's face, and commenced :

" You are rather an unusual girl," she said.

That was nothing startling, thought her client. She had often been told that before—especially by the opposite sex. Anyhow, Madame probably told all her customers that.

"You are changeable. But you do not change in big things. You are—what is the word? Quick—rapide—impulsive! You come to me all of a sudden. You do not know whether to believe me or not. Your friend outside does. I do not worry. I only tell you what is true.

"You have a lot of men. But you do not care for them. There is one now that you think a lot about. He is—he is absent from you at present. He might be absent from you a long time. I do not know."

Diana, who was about to ask a frivolous question, forbore.

"You have had no—real trouble in your life. You have caused trouble—mostly of the heart. You will cause more. Beware of hurting others. Sometime you try to hurt some one else. You will hurt yourself. Others not worth hurting. Jealousy is—what you call it?—a twin-edged sword."

Madame Astra paused, and turned over the other's hand. The veil of her lids was still down over her half-shut eyes.

Diana had time for a moment's thought. Jealousy—hm! Madame was not very right there. A couple of times she had certainly envied Madge Fiseley with her unlimited gown money; and as a kid, of course, there had been childish squabbles with different—but the woman was speaking again.

"You do not yet realize all the powers within you. Soon something will come to make you find out. At present you lead gay life—meet lot of people—never think—yes, you do, sometimes—you think more yet. You could have great influence. Of yourself, I mean, not what money can buy. And you have great gift. Not money either, yet you never want that. I am a leetle bit worried about you. Things not settled yet, I can't tell. But you will see Madame again. Then I tell you more., That is all to-day. Good-bye."

And the next thing Diana knew she was being gently escorted from the room.

Outside Phyllis stood up, eager for her "reading."

Diana noticed that she was taken into the opposite room to the one she herself had occupied. Apparently Phyllis was classed amongst the "pale ones." Her hair and general complexion certainly justified her being placed in such a category. Some of her carryings on, however, were as highly-coloured as any modern girl had a right to make them.

* * * * *

Phyllis Martel was a little too full of her own sitting with Madame Astra to inquire very deeply into Diana's impressions at first.

The two girls were half-way down the shady side of Collins Street, making for their favourite afternoon tea rendezvous, before the former exclaimed:

"But, Di, you haven't told me what you think of Madame! Isn't she wonderful? What did she say to you?"

The other paused in her reply until they had drawn a little away from a raucous-voiced paper boy, who was bellowing out to the world at large that his wares contained "full account of the city murdah!"

"Oo, what a noise those boys make!" complained Diana. "What do I think about your psychic friend? A little bit dowdy, I think. Too much black on."

"Don't be stoopid, Di. What did she tell you?"

"A few things. She wasn't bad. I think she's rather clever to guess the things she does. But I'm rather disappointed all the same. She didn't tell me anything about fairy princes, or voyages across the sea, or the man I'm going to marry. She didn't even tell me anything funny about any villain who wants to ruin me. Hullo! There's Ted Maitland. I think he is wanting us to have tea with him."

THE train bearing Ralph Harding back to the city was a slow one. Several times it was pulled out into sidings to let other trains pass, or catch up to it, or whatever it is they back passenger trains on to loop lines for, in Victoria.

Ralph was not in the best of moods. He did not quite know whether to be annoyed or worried at the failure of Mrs. Lensker to keep her appointment. It was she that had made it —sent him a letter to his town address asking him urgently to come. Yet why had she done so if she was going to let something stand in the way of her keeping it ? She knew that his time was valuable. Yet some women——

It did not seem possible that he could have made the mistake. The time had been fixed definitely for this day. He believed he had her letter in his wallet. He had previously examined his loose papers for it, but found that it was not there.

Dash this train ! He had wasted a whole day, and didn't even get a decent rest out of it. The journey was as wearisome a one as could be. He forgot his mildly elated mood of the morning.

The letter was not in his wallet. Must have left it in the office. He hoped the clerk had not filed it away with other stuff, or lost it.

The engine gave a prolonged blast of its deep-toned whistle; and presently the train shuddered to a stop at a murky platform.

There was a series of rattlings and stampings, and somewhere outside a husky voice cried, "Wulgong! Seven minutes here refreshments!"

Here was the place where Ralph had refreshed himself with a whisky that morning. It seemed days ago, now. This time he took two whiskies.

A train from Melbourne must have passed through not long previously. An elderly man who wore a faded tweed cap and badly wanted a shave was selling an early edition of the evening papers, propped up against a post near the booking office.

Ralph bought one, and retired to the lonely seclusion of his compartment. There were not many people travelling that night.

He had scarcely glanced at the sheet, when he lost all sense of his surroundings. The train started with a more nerve-destroying shriek and jerk than usual, but he did not heed them.

Staring across the front page of the newspaper was a big scare headline:

MYSTERIOUS MURDER IN CITY

CORPSE DISCOVERED IN AUTOMATIC LIFT

THE UNKNOWN VICTIM OF LOMBARDY CHAMBERS

In a flash, all the tension and horror of the previous night came back to Ralph. They were real!

Quivering in every fibre, though he did not know it, Ralph read, as one appalled:

One of the strangest tragedies that have occurred in this city for some years took place sometime last night in the Lombardy Chambers, Queen Street. The body of a man, so far unidentified and believed to have been murdered, was discovered prone on the floor of one of the lifts at about the hour of quarter-past eight this morning. How the body got there, and who the deceased was, is at present occupying the attention of half the detectives at Russell Street.

The first intimation that there was anything wrong came shortly after the janitor of the building, G. Burrowes, commenced his duties for the day. Noticing that No. 1 lift was not in its usual place on the ground floor, something prompted him to press the button; but nothing happened. Puzzled, he ascended the stairs and found that the lift was stuck halfway between the second and third floors. It was in such a position that he could not see into the compartment, but it did not strike him that anything serious had happened. Possibly, he thought, some derangement of the mechanism had occurred when a tenant had rung for the lift from one of the upper floors. Sometimes tenants worked back or otherwise utilized their rooms in the building at night. After six o'clock the elevator was made automatic. There did not appear to be anybody imprisoned in the lift, for he made considerable noise in going up the stairs and any such person inside would surely have heard him and called out. So he did not worry about the matter any more, but waited until the lift attendant arrived about twenty minutes later. Burrowes then informed him that "something had gone wrong with the lift."

The attendant, Watkins, a returned soldier with one arm, soon discovered that the current operating the lift had been switched off, apparently while the cage was in motion. On the current being turned on again, the lift immediately ascended either to the fourth or fifth floor, which appeared to show that when the bell was last rung, it was from one of those floors.

Watkins then brought the lift down to the ground floor, and that was when the ghastly nature of its contents was revealed. The deceased was lying at full length on the floor, apparently stabbed to death.

A doctor and the police were immediately summoned. Dr. K. O. Rush, who attended, stated that life had been extinct for about ten or twelve hours. No instrument was found by which the fatal wound—a deep incision in the left side, near the heart—had been inflicted. The deceased's clothes on that side of his body, the floor and one or two other parts of the lift, were stained with blood.

When this edition went to press, nobody had yet identified the victim. The official description of the body is as follows :—

Man, aged about forty ; dark hair, close cropped, black moustache, sallow complexion, height 5 ft. 10½ in., of medium build ; dressed in a well-fitting suit of evening clothes ; no hat or overcoat was found. Deceased could be described as handsome, and looked of a cultured type. There is a small depressed scar on his left temple.

No papers or other articles were found on the dead man which might give a clue to his identity. All money and other valuables had been taken from him, even the links from his cuffs, and, presumably, the stud from his shirt-front, for the hole for this conventional ornament was empty when the body was examined.

How or when the deceased got into the lift is a complete mystery. The janitor, who was in the building until nine o'clock on the previous night, does not appear to be able to throw any light on the matter. Apparently, whatever occurred took place after then. The police, however, are apparently following several lines of inquiry, and it is reported that three people have been detained by them at the detective office. Two of these people are well known in social circles here, and startling developments may be confidently expected.

" Damn them for their confidence," muttered Ralph. " I wonder who those two well-known persons are—Jack Fiseley and Hal Roach, I suppose. They'd kick up enough row for the world to know they were there. Jove, this looks a nasty business ! "

For a while he gazed at the fleeting shadows through the carriage windows. The night had closed down outside.

" I wonder," he murmured, " I wonder. . . . I suppose I am one of the startling developments expected. Burrowes knew I was working back, I think. Anyhow, half a dozen other people knew. . . . I guess I'm in for a pretty rough time with the police."

The thought that he would be likely to come in for initial suspicion in this matter seemed in a strange way to calm Ralph. The renewed horror of his experience became lost in formulating plans for his own self-protection—he knew they would be necessary. In the absence of other evidence, his own account of the affair might sound thin to official ears.

Ralph lit a cigar with deliberate care.

" Funny thing," he mused, " all the fellow's possessions—that diamond stud, for instance—being taken from the body. I distinctly remember the dashed thing shining away there like a spark of fire. Funny thing. . . ."

He remembered the blood-curdling, cackling laugh again, shrugged his shoulders, and stood up. He took a short stroll along the corridor outside, came to the open space at the end of the carriage, and studied the wall map of the Victorian Railways stuck up there, but with unseeing eyes.

He took a drink of water from a decanter resting in a recess in the wall, returned to his compartment and tried to make himself comfortable.

" Ah, well," he muttered, " the best thing I can do is to go straight to the police, I suppose. If this was only the blinkin' daytime, I would have seen my lawyer first. But I can't knock him up at this hour."

Which second-last sentence showed that Ralph was fully alive to his own possibilities in the case. He had no wish to take any unnecessary risks in the matter.

* * * * *

Further down the line, the train filled up a little.

Two men came into Ralph's compartment. One of them had a later edition of the evening's paper.

Although they appeared to have been to some semi-country race meeting or other, they both seemed full of the strange new tragedy which figured so largely in the news.

No doubt, many thousands of other people were at present discussing this very matter.

Ralph wondered how surprised his new travelling companions would be if he suddenly announced to them his part in the affair.

" I don't suppose the police will get the fellow who did it," one of the men said. He spoke in a rather sarcastic vein.

" I don't suppose so," concurred the other. " This'll make still another murderer walking about amongst us."

Ralph wondered vaguely if the police ever would catch the assassin. After all, he admitted, it would be a difficult task. He himself had been in the thick of it, as it were, yet he doubted if his evidence would be of much real value to the police—to catch the real criminal, that was.

He suddenly felt sick at the whole business. Curse his nerves.

After a while, the man put down his paper on the seat beside him, and the two fell to discussing other subjects.

Waiting a suitable opportunity, Ralph asked permission to read it.

There was nothing very fresh in the news columns to throw any light on the tragedy. The names of the persons " detained " were not, of course, divulged.

Ralph was about to throw the paper down again, when something in the Stop-Press column caught his eye. He just restrained himself from giving vent to a cry of amazement. There was a curt announcement that the name of the victim in the Lombardy Chambers tragedy had been ascertained. This was M. K. Lensker. Nothing further besides the name was given.

Ralph stared hard at the blurring lights outside. The train was passing through the suburbs, rapidly nearing its journey's end.

Lensker! That would be Michael Lensker, a man whom he had often heard of, but never met.

The woman he had gone to see was the dead man's wife!

Chapter VII *A Serious Situation*

WHEN Ralph learned the name of the victim of the Lombardy Chambers tragedy, all his previous resolves and beliefs were shattered. He must consider the position from a different angle—his conception of the affair had been rudely altered now. It might be a much more serious business for him.

He wondered if the other occupants of the carriage had noticed his sudden agitation. Apparently they had not.

Ralph made a quick decision. The cars were now slowing down in the North Melbourne platform. He would leave the train here. Possibly there might be representatives from the Criminal Investigation Branch eagerly awaiting his arrival at the terminus at Spencer Street. He had no wish to meet such gentry at present. He would forestall them.

Seeking a public telephone on the top ramp of the station, Ralph called up a number on the Windsor Exchange. He got his connection with reasonable despatch.

" Is that double nine o three ? " he asked. " Is Miss Allison in ? Can I speak to her ? Oh, you needn't tell her the name."

Much to his joy, presently he heard Diana's soft tones replying.

"That you, Dee ? You know who's speaking. Excuse me for ringing you at this hour, but I'd like to see you to-night. On an important little matter. Can I see you alone, first, at all events ? Right. No, don't worry, it's not nearly so serious as it might be—I suppose. I'm coming at once in a taxi. Be there in about twenty minutes. The side way, under the balcony ? Right-ho. Excuse me being a bit breathless. Good-bye."

Ralph left the station and sought a hire-car.

On his way out to Malvern in the car he had been able to pick up, Ralph reviewed the position as rapidly as possible.

His object in going straight to Diana Allison was twofold.

First, to find out any facts that may have been in her possession regarding the case. Through her close friendship with Madge Fiseley she would probably be kept in touch with the latest developments.

Secondly, Ralph felt that very soon, if not already, he was liable to be subjected to severe suspicion of several sorts, and it was to reassure Diana on these points he wished to speak to her. He could not at present lay *all* the facts before her, but it was to elicit her understanding and help, for both their sakes, through the critical period to come, that he sought to see her by herself.

Anyhow, he felt it was his duty above all things—the way things were going—to speak to his fiancée first in these matters. Better that than for her to learn something publicly which he had not prepared her for.

Ralph had no parents or close relatives in Victoria. His mother had died many years previously, and his father, after seeing him well established as a boarder in a large Public School, had disappeared after leaving some provision for Ralph's needs in the shape of a few hundred pounds lodged with a solicitor.

This had been occasionally supplemented from abroad, and once, just before Ralph qualified for matriculation, his father suddenly appeared from South Africa, looking sunburned and jolly, gave Ralph a royal time for about a fortnight, and then just as suddenly went off again, without any serious talk as to the future. Since then, Ralph had neither seen nor heard from his father; nor had the solicitor with whom Ralph's modest means had been entrusted.

So Ralph, with an excellent but unspecialized education, and a number of well-to-do but genuine friends, had had to fend for himself. This he had determined to do to the best of his ability, and already he was on the high-road to a success which was the more welcome because it came from his own efforts.

Diana Allison came from the class with whom he had been educated; but she liked him the more because of his efforts to get on in the world, and to raise himself financially as high as he actually was socially. Major Allison, indulgent as he now was towards his wife and daughter, had had his struggles in his early youth; and, although if need be he would have been pleased to provide the wherewithal for Diana's happiness as the wife of a poorer man, both of them knew that Ralph would have taken no such assistance from his wife's father.

Nor, on present indications, would he ever need to. It was just a matter of waiting a little longer.

The only thing that now seemed to stand in the way of Ralph's future happiness was the developments that it seemed possible might evolve from this unfortunate case with which he had got entangled.

Ralph frowned into the night. There was a time of test before all of them.

When the car reached Hockley Road, Malvern, Ralph dismissed it and walked up a few yards until he came to Major Allison's residence.

He entered the side gate, and approached the house along the drive. Diana was waiting for him. A light burned in a small room facing the curve of the verandah which here paralleled the drive, and she sat in a lounge chair, just inside the open French windows.

"Ralph!" she cried softly, rising to her feet and coming forward. A little of her usual warmth seemed lacking from their greeting; but under the circumstances this was not a time for affectionate demonstration. Together they went into the room—a sort of parlour.

Diana looked a trifle worn and worried, as if she had had a shock.

"Father's home," she said, motioning Ralph to a chair. "But mother's out—gone to a bridge party at Guilders."

She seated herself in the lounge chair near Ralph.

"I wanted a few minutes alone with you, Dee," commenced the latter, "because I am worried——"

"So are we all," she exclaimed, with a trace of weariness in her voice. "Poor Madge Fiseley, I've been with her all the afternoon—but of course you have read the case?"

"Yes, Dee. The first I—I read of it was in the train, half-way down from Dalesbrook. It was Dalesbrook I went to to-day. Got a paper at Wulgong, and there was this thing staring me in the face. I never thought, I never knew, that it could have happened in actual reality. I came straight from the train to see you, Dee."

"Of course you've heard the latest, have you, Ralph?"

"No, Dee. That's why——"

"Oh, it's terrible. Jack Fiseley and Hal Roach have been arrested for murder!"

Ralph whistled.

"They kept them at the detective office all day, and to-night—about seven o'clock—they formally charged them. I cried when I heard. Ralph, I am glad you called to see me. I feel better now that you're here. Father wouldn't let me talk about it, you know; and, oh! I must. Think how Madge must feel! And Mrs. Fiseley!"

"It will bring a publicity which even the latter lady will not appreciate," murmured Ralph, a trifle callously. "But seriously, Dee, I don't see how Hal and Jack could have done it. Are they actually charged?"

"Yes. Of course nobody believes that they did it. Deliberately, at all events. They were a bit lively and excited when they left here—you know—but, no! I'm sure there's some mistake. In spite of what the police said they saw."

"What did the police see?"

"Well, Hal's number was taken for speeding in Flinders Street, just a few minutes before they arrived at Lombardy Chambers. Then another policeman cautioned them outside the door a little later for using noisy language. That must have been just after they came out again. This policeman swears he heard one of them say, 'Serves him right if we knocked his head off for blocking our road,' or words similar to that."

"And the police are going on that?" questioned Ralph.

"That, and other things. They've been round making inquiries as to how things were at the Fiseleys' party last night. I've been questioned, and so has everybody else really. The papers will have a great time over this."

"That's the worst part of it, in a way."

"Fiseley's solicitor—Grant Evans—told me this evening that at the worst it should only be manslaughter. The police theory is that it was not deliberate murder, but that Hal and Jack knocked the man over with the car, and took the body into the building to get rid of it."

"But that would not be a very reasonable thing to do."

"The police seemed to think it was quite consistent with the state of mind of the two boys. They were certainly in a wild mood last night, Ralph. And I believe they seemed very muddled about things this morning."

The slight signs of "breaking up" which Diana had at first shown had now disappeared. She spoke more clearly and concisely as the conversation progressed.

"But again," said Ralph, "the man was

stabbed. The police admitted that in the paper report."

"They think it was some sharp part of the machine which caused that wound. There was a rod loose on one of the lamp brackets, for instance."

"And what about the disappearance of the dead man's valuables—his diamond stud, for a instance? Do they say Hal and Jack stole those?"

"Grant Evans says that the man, too, smelt of drink, and he might have been robbed before the car hit him. Some of those street-sneakers might have gone through him in the dark while he was more or less helpless. Or else—this is another police idea—Jack and Hal might have taken the things for a blind: to make it look as if robbery were the motive for the murder."

She paused, and Ralph was silent for awhile, lost in deep thought. He had not up to now seriously considered who the culprit (or culprits) might be; his mind was rather concerned with other aspects of the matter. But the possibility of any case against his two friends being strongly supported, never seemed likely.

Now, however, a new light seemed thrown upon the affair. It *was* possible that Hal and Jack, quite unintentionally in the first place, had done this thing. They were, at times, two wild fools. And——

Ralph recalled, when he thought the thing was an elaborate joke, how he blamed the two for it. He was quite satisfied that they were responsible. Everything fitted in so well. Now, when the thing was not a joke, but the grimmest of realities, everything fitted in just the same. It was just as likely that they had done it, as——

Diana's voice brought him back from the realms of speculation.

"Ralph, I am so glad that you are out of it all, dear."

Ralph started. He had come to explain to Diana that he was very much in it all.

"Er—how?" he asked haltingly. "I thought that I was rather—concerned in the matter."

"Of course you are concerned, like most of us. But I mean it's lucky you are not alongside Jack and Hal—that you left the building before anything happened."

Ralph stared at the speaker. Was this the current belief she was voicing?

"It's bad enough for them to be in it, of course. But if you had still been at your office, Ralph, I'm sure in some way they would have tangled you up with them. You can't think what a relief it is to me."

"What makes you so—so sure that I was not in my office when the tragedy occurred?"

"Well, I knew Hal and Jack were absolutely bent on paying you a sort of surprise visit—it was my own stupid idea at first, I admit; just see the consequences of it!—and they wouldn't be persuaded not to go. So I tried to ring you, so that you might be prepared. But you had gone—I couldn't raise you."

"So it was—I see. Anything else——"

"Yes, there was no light in your office, or on any of the upper floors by the time the car arrived outside. The policeman who cautioned them for their noise noticed that."

"Then, I might not be worried in this affair? I mean by the police."

"Oh, I suppose you will have to answer a few questions, the same as all of us. You must expect that. . . ."

"Did the police express any desire to see me, do you know?"

"Oh, yes. Of course they were told you were the object of the boys' visit to the building, and they wanted to know something about you, naturally. When they learned you had gone to the country to-day, and would be back before the morning, they did not at all seem perturbed. I suppose they will look you up to-morrow."

It seemed to Ralph that if he chose he could merely deny all knowledge of the incidents of the previous evening, and nobody would be any the wiser. The fact of his visiting Dalesbrook in order to interview the wife of the dead man need have no bearing on the matter. As he had informed the manager of the local hotel, it was purely a business appointment. Why Mrs. Lensker had not kept that appointment he knew no more than the reason for her husband being in the vicinity of his office.

For a moment he was tempted to follow this line of pretence, and keep clear of the entanglements which might otherwise wait to enmesh him. He had a good reason for doing so—Diana's happiness.

But Ralph had already made a resolve, and he was not one to cast aside a promise given even to himself. And no happiness can be secure without honest understanding. He arose and, placing his chair next to Diana's, he put his arm protectingly around her white shoulders.

"Dee," he commenced, leaning forward a trifle, "there are a few things I must tell you, but first of all I want to ask you a question—do you trust me?"

The girl's big eyes became wider still.

"Trust you? Of course I do. Do you think I would—like you, the way I do, if I didn't do that?"

"Forgive me, Diana; of course I know you trust me, but I wanted to hear you say so. It may be that I shall have to rely on your trust pretty considerably, shortly. It may be that you will have to see me bearing the suspicion of others, and yet able to say no word. It may be, I don't know. But if such happens, I am sure that the knowledge that your—your confidence is in me will help me to win through."

The look of amazement on Diana's face grew.

"Why," she cried, "whatever is the matter?"

"Well," replied the other unrestrainedly, "folk are wrong if they thought I left Lombardy Chambers last night thinking that nothing had occurred. Dee, I saw that dead man in the lift!"

"Ralph! Good heavens! And did you see the others?"

"Hal and Jack? No. At least, not till after I left the building. Then I saw them on the doorsteps."

"But why didn't you report the matter to the police? Was it because Hal and Jack are our friends, and——"

"No. It was because I thought the whole thing was a hoax. At first it seemed real—terribly real. But then I heard somebody laughing or giggling downstairs, and the lift with the man in it was taken away from me before I could get into it, so when I saw those two making a noise outside—I went down another stairway after the lift descended—I immediately jumped to the conclusion it was one of their elaborate practical jokes, got up for my benefit. I didn't know who the man was—I got a good look at his face—but I reckoned he was some new pal of theirs, quite willing to chime in with them."

"How horrible!" said Diana, with a shudder. "You were all alone in that big building with the dead body."

"Yes, just as I realized what was in the lift the telephone rang—it must have been you trying to raise me. I went back to the 'phone, but could get no satisfaction. When I returned to the lift it had gone, body and all. . . . I did not know it was not a hoax until I read the paper in the train. . . . That is all I know about that part of it except——"

"Except what, Ralph?"

"That the man had a conspicuous diamond stud in his front when I saw him."

"What does that prove?"

"Well, it proves that he was not robbed in the street before—before his accident, whatever it was. Yet it seems hard to think that Hal and Jack would be so callous as to remove it afterwards——"

"Hal or Jack! Oh, Ralph!"

"Of course, they are not responsible for the man's death. There is some horrible mistake. Evidence is too circumstantial—yet who could have done it, and why? Dee, I have a notion there may be something very deep underlying this, and for their own sakes, as well as my own, I want to find out. I think, for the present, I shall say nothing to the police ; I want to be free for the next day or two. My evidence won't help Hal and Jack in the slightest, not if the police really think they have 'got it on them.'

"Dee, this is the part I wanted particularly to tell you—the part where I wish to feel that you believe in me absolutely. In a day or two it will probably be reported that a man called at a country hotel—at Dalesbrook, to be precise—inquiring for a Mrs. Lensker. Mrs. Lensker, the wife of the dead man, may or may not have a big part to play in this case. The peculiar thing about this incident is that Mrs. Lensker strangely failed to keep an appointment at the time her husband was lying dead in the Melbourne morgue. Yet at that time her husband was unidentified and no news could have reached Dalesbrook through the usual channels.

"Now, Dee, I was the man that called to see Mrs. Lensker to-day ; I don't want you to learn that from anybody else before me——"

"Good heavens !" cried Diana, "what are you telling me ? You know the wife of the dead man ?"

"Yes, Dee. I have known her for years. But I have never seen him—until last night, and then I didn't know. It was a matter of urgent business I had to see her to-day on; it was at her written request I went. You see, I am agent for various people like that. The whole thing may be a series of queer coincidences, or not; but I feel I want to see Mrs. Lensker personally in the matter before approaching anybody else—even the police. If I go straight back to-morrow, the police will think I am still away on to-day's trip.

"She should be able to throw more light than anybody else as to whether Lensker had any dangerous enemies or not. The police won't trouble to find any other culprit if they think they have got Hal and Jack tight."

Diana nodded her head gravely.

"It seems a strange case, Ralph, and, as you suggest, full of all sorts of nasty possibilities. I think you are quite right to go straight back to Dalesbrook and try to find out all you can from this Lensker woman—seeing you are her adviser. Perhaps that is the only way we can help Hal and Jack. The only thing that puzzles me is——"

"What, dear?"

"Why you should ask me to trust you, when you should know that I have always done that!"

Ralph laughed, a trifle uncomfortably. A slight expression of secretiveness flickered for a moment at the corners of his mouth before his face regained its composure.

" Oh," he said, " I know it was unnecessary, but somehow—well, I suppose I'm sort of rattled, that's all. . . . I thought I'd like to get everything off my mind that was on it, and I have. If I hadn't trusted you, Dee, would I have told you at all ? "

Diana smiled one of her sudden, expansive smiles.

" It's all right, dear old boy," she said brightly. " I think Madame must be right after all. She said I was—sort of touchy, and I didn't know it. But I'm glad I know it now."

" Who's ' Madame ' ? " asked Ralph.

" Oh, only a woman I met lately. But let us forget about this old case for a bit if we can, for you'll have to go home shortly."

The two proceeded to forget their cares in a way that only lovers can.

Chapter VIII *An Attack in the Dark*

IT was after twelve o'clock when Ralph approached his apartment in South Yarra. The house just off the Domain where he had rooms was not much more than a mile from Diana's home, and to-night he had decided to do this on foot. He was not at all sleepy yet, and he found a walk under the stars was a good stimulus to reflection.

On the way back he utilized a public telephone and called up a motor service with whom he did business fairly often. He ordered a touring car to be round at his door by six on the following morning—their fastest car, for preference.

Whatever action he could take in this matter, Ralph wished to take quickly.

He felt glad he had seen Diana, and told her what he had.

He was desperately anxious for everybody's sake that this matter would soon clear itself in some satisfactory way.

Poor Hal and Jack, his old friends! He sincerely wished that they could establish their innocence. And yet if they did, what might follow?

Much depended on his mission of the morrow.

Ralph turned into the short, tree-begirt street where he lived. All was silent here, and his footfalls echoed from the houses opposite. He was aware, without taking any particular notice, of a motor car without lights drawn up on the far side of the street. The people in this vicinity often had late visitors.

Just as his hand went out to unlatch his gate, there was a swift movement behind him, and Ralph felt a strong arm grab him around the neck. At the same time a bulky menacing shadow arose from alongside the fence in front of him.

Chokingly, Ralph felt himself being borne backwards. He was unable to cry out, even if he had thought of doing so.

There was a low whistle from somewhere very near, and he became dimly conscious of the sounds of a motor-engine being started.

So taken by surprise was he, so astounded at this unexpected attack, that for a few seconds Ralph made no real attempt at resistance. He felt the hot rasping breath of his assailant upon his neck, as he strove to drag him back along the footpath.

Ralph gradually realized that his arms were powerless, and that his lungs were rapidly reaching the bursting point. The bulky shadow in front was dodging about ready to lend assistance when necessary.

Then Ralph did the most effective thing he could do, in the circumstances. Feigning a sudden limpness, with a mighty kick he swiftly brought his heel hard back under his aggressor's knee-cap. There was an agonized howl and Ralph felt himself dropped as if he had been suddenly charged with high-tension electricity.

The man in front, however, now made a spring forward. Ralph had a vision of whirling arms in the gloom. With his right, he let out at the massive head, and connected with something hard. A huge, clutching paw fastened on to his shoulder for an instant, but he shook himself free.

Dodging another dark figure on the pavement, he ran—there was nothing else to do. One against three or four has not much of a chance.

Feet pattered after him. He turned the corner into Domain Road ; it was useless trying to find shelter at his own house. The enemy stood between.

Ralph was fleet of foot above the average, and now his breath was coming back he had little doubt that he could easily out-distance his pursuers. Presently he would find a policeman or two, and return home under protection.

He had not gone far, however, when his hopes of early help received a rude shock. A gruff shout was borne to his ears from behind :

" Geordie ! Head the blighter off with the car ! Quick ! "

Ralph heard the sounds of a motor-engine being speeded up. Before him spread a long vista of deserted street. He could see no friendly shiny helmet reflected in the faint beams of the distant lamps.

The neighbourhood was a quiet one. Most of the houses stood well back from the footpath, in their own extensive grounds. Ralph's attackers did not seem at all apprehensive of any row they might make.

He could hear the car now coming along behind him. Ralph's only chance appeared to be to dodge.

There was a small lane on his left. He would try that. He did not know where it led, but it would at least throw the car off its course for a valuable minute or two. Just as the machine shot ahead of him, Ralph turned, and darted into the dark thoroughfare.

The next thing he knew he had collided with two massive forms. Three throats emitted a simultaneous grunt. The unexpected had happened. Ralph had run against two constables. Very dimly now he made out their uniforms.

Before any explanations could be demanded or given, Ralph's pursuers came pelting around the corner. But at this moment the car in the main street had commenced to turn, and its light suddenly illuminated the burly forms of the officers of the law. With startled exclamations, Ralph's late attackers drew up short.

"Traps, by Gee!" cried one, and with remarkable agility they both turned.

"Catch them! Muzzle them! Don't let them go!" yelled Ralph, now taking a turn at pursuer. The policemen, no doubt considerably surprised at their confidences being so rudely broken in upon, were somewhat slower to follow.

With a spring, the men who had chased Ralph leaped on to the running-board of the now moving car, and though the latter made a desperate effort to grab the hinder of the two fellows, they both got clean away.

The car accelerated with a jerk, and Ralph was left alone with the two constables. Echoing in his ear was a loud, mocking laugh—and a sound which, in spite of his excitement, made Ralph suddenly shudder. The laugh ended in a hideous cackle, such as he had heard in the presence of the dead man in the quiet of Lombardy Chambers.

* * * * *

"Well," said one of the policemen at last, breaking in upon Ralph's silence, as he gazed like one transfixed down the road the car had taken, "what's all this row about?"

"I—I don't rightly know," replied Ralph, turning to his two deliverers. "I was set upon by those men outside my own gate, and chased up here. I couldn't get in to my own place, so I just ran."

"Well, you happened to run to the right place," smiled the other and younger constable, who seemed of the good-humoured Irish type. "Where did they chase you from?"

" Not far—Cygnet Street."

" I thought this little street was Cygnet Street ? "

" No, Cygnet Street is the next corner down."

" Oh. And they followed you along with a car. That's a new stunt."

" They tried to head me off with it."

" I endeavoured to get the number, but it was obscured," said the older man. " It was a big American car, probably a Hudson. Have you any idea who they would be ? "

" Not the slightest."

" Or what they wanted ? "

" My watch and chain and wallet, I suppose."

" Just an ordinary case of hold-up ? "

For a fraction of a second Ralph hesitated. No purpose, he quickly decided, could be served by giving these men an inkling of the swift suspicion that had come into his mind. Later on would be the time for that.

" So far as I know, yes," he replied.

" They are pretty common nowadays," said the other, cheerfully. " You were lucky to get out of it as well as you did. Lost nothing ? "

" No," said Ralph. " I've got a sore neck, that's all."

" Right-o, then. We'll see you home. You needn't report the matter any further, we'll see to that. You've got no description of the men, I suppose ? "

" None, except what you saw yourself. Except——"

" Except what ? " chipped in the older constable rather sharply.

" Except that the man driving the car is called Geordie."

" H'm ! That's not much help."

" And one of the fellows was a big chap, with a breath like a rasp—but I suppose you saw that."

" We saw he was a big fellow, dressed in a dark grey suit and black hat,"—the younger constable showed his teeth pleasantly—" but we did not see his breath."

The other constable was frowning. They had come to the corner of Ralph's street, and he had gazed intently at the name-plate on a high picket fence there.

" Yes, this is Cygnet Street, all right," he said. " And what might your name be, sir ? "

Ralph told him.

" Oh, so you're Mr. Harding, are you ? " He spoke as one who had known a name for a long time, but had up till the present never met its possessor. Ralph, however, attached no significance to this. Probably it was his duty, as a local constable, to learn who dwelt in those parts. The other constable said nothing.

" Well, here is where I live, and this is where the men attacked me," said Ralph, halting before No. 10. "My landlady's name is Mrs. Hicks—it's in the telephone book. Q 2283. If there are any further developments or you want me at all, you can raise me here or leave a message."

"We will do what we can to catch these fellows. But don't trouble about the matter any further unless you hear from us."

"The only thing is—I hope this sort of thing won't be a frequent occurrence. Once is enough for the time being. By the way, what are your names, just in case——?"

"My name," said the senior man, "is Tate, and this is Constable Sheridan. But I don't think you'll have any more trouble. These fellows got a fright to-night; they weren't expecting us in the neighbourhood. Usually we—well, the place is generally quiet, isn't it? But we'll watch it about here from now on."

"Well," said Ralph, opening the gate, "thank you very much, constables, for what you have done already. Without you I might have been—knocked! I don't think I need trouble you any more to-night."

Slipping a coin into their hands, he turned, and made for the front door.

Ralph's bedroom was on the ground floor, facing the front garden. As he pulled down his blind preparatory to undressing, he happened to glance through the window. The two policemen were still near the gate, and a thin shaft of light was flashing about between them.

"H'm!" thought Ralph. "Looking for clues with an electric pocket lamp. I hope they find some."

A sudden sense of weariness overcame him. Setting the alarm for half-past five, he tumbled into bed.

He hoped, for the next four and a half hours, he would forget the problems which were beginning to perplex his brain.

Chapter IX *Where is Mrs. Lensker?*

RALPH returned rather disconsolate from his trip to Dalesbrook, or, rather, Camlot Springs. He had gone direct to the latter locality in his hired car, and a passing bread-carter—who stared rather strongly at Ralph's request—had told him where the Lenskers' house might be found.

Ralph had found it at a little before 10 a.m., but the satisfaction he had gleaned from the visit was practically nil.

Now, as he sat alone in his office—he had arrived back in town about four in the afternoon, and at five his clerks had gone—he bit at the top of his fountain-pen thoughtfully. A troubled line furrowed his brow.

Mrs. Lensker had disappeared. She had not been seen since the news of her husband's death had been flashed up to Dalesbrook on the wires. The house, a fine modern structure, magnificently furnished, was empty, save for the local policeman, when Ralph arrived. This policeman, who did not seem very difficult to get friendly with, had told Ralph all there was to be known up there, which was not much.

He took Ralph for a newspaper reporter. The latter did not disillusion him.

It seems that when it was definitely established who the victim of the Lombardy Chambers tragedy was, this policeman had himself come out from Dalesbrook in one of Williams's cars to break the news to Mrs. Lensker, who was a very popular lady in the district. He had been unable to make anybody hear, so he thought that possibly Mrs. Lensker was out for the evening—visiting friends in the neighbourhood, perhaps.

He called back again at about eleven, and received no answer. So he decided to stay the night at Kennedy's place—the Camlot Springs Hotel—and pop up in the morning.

In the daylight he could see that the house was still empty, and that there were some slight signs of disturbance inside. Accordingly, he forced an entrance. There was no trace of Mrs. Lensker. Two chairs were knocked over in different rooms, several drawers had been pulled out and not shut, while there were a few unwashed dishes, from supper, presumably, in the kitchen.

His theory was that she had somehow got news of her husband's death, when it was thought to have been a deliberate murder. Being alone in the empty house—the maid was away at her mother's in Dalesbrook, ill at the time—Mrs. Lensker had become distracted with grief, and had finally wandered off into the bush, and had possibly made away with herself. There was a big dam not far away, and also the Stony Creek. The policeman had sent in word to Dalesbrook to have these dragged during the day. Search parties would also be organized. He seemed to wish to impress Ralph with a sense of his efficiency.

"Nobody remembers seeing Mrs. Lensker about during the afternoon or evening?" Ralph had asked.

"No, up to the present I have found no one who has seen her since yesterday morning. That was the baker. As you see, the house is lonely and this uncleared land on each side of the allotment hides the view from any distance along the road. The nearest neighbours are the Blacks, and they are practically in the township, half a mile down. No, poor woman, nobody saw her."

"She was pretty popular, hereabouts, wasn't she?"

"Yes. They did a lot of entertaining amongst the better-class people round here and Dalesbrook. There is quite a number of these good country houses in this locality—mostly retired city people, or families that have come up here for their health. The Lenskers mixed in that sort of crowd; but they seemed to have a lot of visitors up from town too, from time to time. Often she had two maids. In fact, I—er—am friendly with a young girl she engages when the ordinary maid—Maggie Thompson—isn't enough."

"And what was Mr. Lensker?"

"Ah, I don't rightly know. He always seemed to have plenty of money—the tradespeople never complained of him not paying their bills promptly, which cannot be said for others, more flash, in these parts. I believe he was a retired jeweller, or something of that sort, who still did a bit of dealing whenever he had a chance. Anyhow, Millie—that's my girl—says she's seen them handling jewels in that house that'd surprise you. Of course, most of 'em belonged to Mrs. Lensker, and she wasn't afraid to wear 'em in front of visitors. Mister, too, seemed to be an expert, and was always criticizing them, and whenever he came back, and before he went away, too, they always seemed to be discussin' jewels. So that's what I reckon his biz was."

"Quite likely," agreed Ralph. "How long were the Lenskers living in the district?"

"About two years. Just before I was sent up here from Melbourne."

"Is it not possible," Ralph suggested, "that Mrs. Lensker went out in her car yesterday—I understand she owns one—and has not since returned? I mean, she might have gone for a drive and had an accident."

"There have been none reported," replied the other; "besides, the only car noticed up this way yesterday afternoon was a big Hudson with the screens up. The Lenskers' car is a red single-seater, easily picked out. Anyhow," the constable concluded, "we can soon see, the garage is round the back."

He led the way to a shed in the rear of the premises. Sure enough, behind the closed doors stood the red single-seater. Obviously the missing lady had not disappeared in that.

Now, as Ralph sat nibbling his fountain-pen top in the quiet of his office, it was the fact that this car had apparently not been used on the previous day that gave him furiously to think.

It did not seem possible, by ordinary means at least, for Mrs. Lensker to have learned of her husband's death before the time she was due to take out her motor in order to keep her appointment with Ralph. It was not until fairly late in the afternoon that identification of the dead man was established.

The local policeman's theory was untenable. There was some other reason for Mrs. Lensker's wandering off than her supposedly received shock.

Ralph was developing another theory of his own—shadowy and unsubstantial, but with a few solid facts to guide it. He was as much in the dark as anyone could be as to the victim of the tragedy, and any reasons why the latter should have suffered violence at the hands of others, yet he had, in a way, been caught in from the outskirts of the sordid business, and he felt that before much longer he might be whirled about in a very maelstrom of events.

There was that letter to him from the dead man's wife. He had come straight to the office to find it, rather than first seek the police—which he had now determined he would next do, and place before them what information he had. That letter was important, it might have a bearing on the case, and the detectives should see that too. He forgot its exact terms. He knew that it referred to urgency, and worry, and ended with an appealing little " Do come." But it was not the first missive of a similar nature he had received from the same source, and Ralph could have no notion that it was a prælude to a murder! Being the "City Representative" of an attractive young married woman does not usually carry with it such tragic involvements!

The letter was not in the tray where he expected it might be. Possibly young Jefferies, the correspondence clerk, had filed it away somewhere.

No; Jefferies hadn't. He did not remember seeing any letter on pink notepaper, dated from Camlot Springs, via Dalesbrook.

After the rest had gone, Ralph personally undertook a more extensive search for the letter. He could not find it. Now that the short communication, once so carelessly handled, continued to elude him, the value of its possession seemed intensely magnified.

Mrs. Lensker's letter, in all probability, might prove a factor of some importance in the Lombardy Case. That, of course, depended on other factors, and those in Ralph's baffled state of semi-knowledge, were several and puzzling.

The first, of course, was the presence of Hal and Jack at the building about the time of the victim's death. In spite of the fact that, without new and very tangible evidence, the police would continue to hold to their theory, Ralph considered this but co-incidental.

Next, there was his own part in the affair. Failing a successful case against the others, attention would probably be next turned to himself. Ralph did not shrink from recognizing the fact that there were, to say the least, considerable grounds for suspicion in this latter case.

Thirdly, and most important in Ralph's mind, were the Unknown Factors. He had a growing conviction that Lensker's death was caused by deliberate murder, and that there was some dark agency—enemies of the dead man—behind it all.

What strengthened this was the memory of that cruel cackling laugh he had first heard on the night of the tragedy. He had, on the morning after, set this down as possibly a tipsy giggle —distorted by his imagination—of the practical jokers, Hal Roach and Jack Fiseley. But now, in the light of clearer reasoning, he felt that this could not have been.

He had since heard that sound repeated, unmistakably, in circumstances where neither Jack nor Hal could have been present. There was that mysterious attack upon himself of the previous evening. Ordinarily, it might have been taken merely as one with robbery as its object; the underworld of Melbourne were getting pretty daring of late. But that cackle from the departing car "labelled" it. It had something to do with the Lombardy Chambers affair.

Then there was the unexplained absence of

Mrs. Lensker—she who, above all, ought to have known if her husband had had any desperate enemies. She had disappeared—by Jove, it was a wonder he had not thought of it before. A Hudson car. It was a Hudson car, with screens up—according to the policeman Tate—from which the attack upon himself had been made. A Hudson car had been seen in the vicinity of Camlot Springs on Thursday—yesterday morning.

In very truth, it was just such a machine that he had seen pass down the Melbourne Road as he had sat on the veranda of the Great Western Hotel at Dalesbrook. Two sounds had impressed themselves upon him at the time: the thin-voiced tones of a woman, and—a noise like that infernal cackle.

There could be no doubt about it. Mrs. Lensker had passed within a few feet of where he was waiting for her. She had been carried off against her will by the very people who, a few hours later, had attempted to kidnap him. He realized that now.

The wife of the murdered man was, in all probability, held captive somewhere in the city. Unless—unless she by now had been done away with by the same persons who had taken the husband's life. He shuddered at the thought. Or perhaps later that act might come. The possibility was horrible.

Ralph almost wished now he had been taken captive by the men in the car. He should, at least, have learned much. He fancied, after all, that no harm had yet come to Mrs. Lensker. He was apparently wanted alive, and in all probability the two would have been brought together.

The fact of Lensker being found in Ralph's building was significant, and, considered in conjunction with other things, looked as if the man might have been on his way to see Ralph when he was overtaken and killed. Why Lensker should have wanted to see him, Ralph could not conjecture. The matter must have been exceedingly important for him to have gone to the building at that hour. How he could know that Ralph was then in his office was also a mystery. Perhaps, however, he had first called at his rooms, and discovered Ralph's whereabouts. Mrs. Hicks should know. Ralph had not spoken to Mrs. Hicks since the morning before the tragedy.

Anyhow, all this was vague theorizing. If he could find that tantalizing letter it would give some basis for definite speculation. Besides, with it, he could more impress the police with his story. He must go to them, now.

Ralph frowned. If there were a strong case against Hal and Jack, he might have great difficulty in persuading the officials of the value of his own evidence, and the genuineness of his point of view. He might be held to have concocted a theory for the sake of saving his friends, or he might merely succeed in diverting suspicion to himself.

He nodded to himself, grimly. Whichever way the wind blew, some one Ralph cared for stood to suffer. Anyhow, Diana trusted him. . . .

He did not find the letter. It was no good looking for it any longer. The more Ralph thought about it, the less sure he was as to what he had done with it.

In all likelihood it was at home—in one of his rooms. He was certain that he had not destroyed it.

He looked at his watch. It was five minutes past six. He would go straight out to Cygnet Street. Then, after some dinner (and the finding of the letter), he would go up to Russell Street—the Headquarters of the Melbourne Criminal Investigation Branch. In the morning he would see Grant Evans, the Fiseleys' solicitor.

He was glad now he had obtained the names of the two constables who had assisted him on the previous night. . . .

It was almost with a shudder that Ralph stepped into the automatic lift. Doubtless there would be few occupiers of the building that would remain in Lombardy Chambers after the hour of six o'clock for some time to come.

As he approached the little room which stood between the lift well and the main entrance, on the ground floor, in which the janitor kept his " things," a head stuck out. It was that of Burrowes.

The man obviously had been drinking. The face was flushed, and the eyes had a fish-like glaze, though they were not without a dull gleam of shrewdness.

" 'Ullo, Mr. Harding," purred the janitor, fixing his eyes on Ralph, after a hurried glance up and down the passage. " Leavin' late again? Wooden min' a l'il tragedy bit more often in Chambers, would you? "

And the man slowly and deliberately winked.

Ralph hesitated, astounded, and then marched straight on with a curt " Good night, Burrowes."

Burrowes stared after the retreating form with a pained expression on his face, and Ralph heard him murmur:

" Only celebratin', that was all."

As he walked down to his tram Ralph was distinctly puzzled over this little incident. Upstairs, in his office, he had considered three main factors in this amazing case.

Here, obviously, was a fourth.

MRS. HICKS, Ralph's landlady, was a tall gaunt woman, with large, protuberant eyes. She carried a quaint air with her, as of silent contempt for other people's troubles, and if she in her time had suffered the most *superior* strokes of ill-fortune—hers had been the aristocracy of ill-luck, and other people's worries, no matter how great, could never by any chance touch her pet ones.

Whenever a murder, fire, or disaster was reported in the papers, Mrs. Hicks just sniffed. What were other people's upsets ? Just trifling annoyances, that should not be taken seriously. She had known the *real* thing.

Whatever comprised this sorrow-drenched past in which Mrs. Hicks loved to indulge her morbid memory, Ralph never knew ; but he could tell by her manner as she served him with his dinner that evening that she had to some extent guessed the trouble he himself was mixed up in, and was already comparing it most unfavourably with her own.

A dead man found in his office building, and him chasing around the country the next two days—hm ! what was that ? His two friends charged with murder, and probably he himself brought up for complexity, whatever they called it, in a day or two, why there were much worse things than that to worry about. Some people didn't know they were alive. *She* could tell—but Mr. Harding was speaking.

" Has anybody called for me here lately, Mrs. Hicks ? " Ralph asked.

" No, not in the last day or two, Mr. Harding. Were you expecting anyone ? "

" Well, on Wednesday night last. I fancy some one might have called for me then."

" No, Mr. Harding," Mrs. Hicks replied, then added, rather mournfully, " not even a policeman."

" Not even a policeman ! " exclaimed Ralph. " Why, Mrs. Hicks, what do you mean ? "

The good lady paused in the act of picking up a dish of fruit from the sideboard, brushed back a couple of straying wisps of hair from her face, and then answered, rather wearily :

" Oh, I don't know. After reading the papers I just thought—but it's nothing. Nothing at all."

Then she resumed her occupation.

" Are you *sure*, Mrs. Hicks," Ralph persisted, " that a man did not call or make inquiries about me ? On the Wednesday afternoon or evening, I mean."

" No, Mr. Harding, no man called."

It struck Ralph as peculiar, that if Michael Lensker had gone to the Lombardy Chambers especially to see him, that he had not first gone to his apartments, where there was much more chance of finding Ralph at that hour.

But then, of course, there was the telephone; and Mrs. Hicks was a person that one had to be most explicit with, when soliciting information.

" Nobody 'phoned me that day, Mrs. Hicks? "

" No—except—yes, a man did ring you."

Ralph's heart beat a trifle faster. Here might be a slight clue.

" Yes, Mrs. Hicks. What did he want? "

" He wanted to know if you would be going out that night."

" I see. What time was that? "

" About half-past six, it was. You had dinner in town that night, didn't you? "

" Yes, and what did you say? "

" Said I didn't know. I knew you were not coming home, that was all."

" Hm! I see. And did the man state his name? "

" Yes. I asked him, and he said it was Mr. Clarke, and that he was expecting to see you at some place like ' Glenora.' "

Ralph grunted with a slight shade of annoyance. It was nothing but that infernal coxcomb, Cyril Clarke, ringing up to ascertain if he were going to the Fiseleys' party that night. Doubtless he wanted to know if he were to have a free run with Diana Allison, in Ralph's absence. Somehow, from that moment he disliked Clarke more than ever. There seemed to be something about his action that stamped him as being mean and nasty.

Evidently Lensker had not tried to communicate with him prior to going to Lombardy Chambers. This being the case it looked as if the former's presence in the building might, after all, be a coincidence, so far as Ralph was concerned. That, however, others did not believe this to be so, Ralph was still inclined to think. He was very soon to have further proof of this.

* * * * *

Ralph had finished his dinner, and was searching about his sitting-room—he had already looked in his bedroom—for the missing letter, when a knock came to the outer door.

It was Mrs. Hicks.

" Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mr. Harding," she commenced, " that you did have a caller—not a man caller, but a woman."

Ralph spoke a trifle sharply.

" When, Mrs. Hicks ? On the Wednesday night ? "

" Oh, no, Mr. Harding, this morning—about nine o'clock. A woman."

" What sort of a woman ? "

" Well, she had a black costume on—crêpe de chine, I think it was—with hair done up each side under a dark hat trimmed with feathers. A veil——"

"Was she young or old, or what?"

"Oh—youngish—about forty. One of those fat, dumpy figures that black doesn't make look any thinner——"

"I don't think I know her. Did she leave a name or anything?"

"She said you didn't know her. She didn't leave any name, though I asked her, and she said she had only come to see you on business, though she didn't say what the business was. She said she would call here again. I said——"

"Oh, well, you needn't have bothered to tell me all this now, Mrs. Hicks. I was only concerned with who might have called on Wednesday night, when I asked you. Thanks for telling me, though. Good n——"

"But wait a minute, Mr. Harding," went on the good lady, who was not so easily got rid of as Ralph had hoped—her belated account of the soap canvasser, or whatever the business caller was, was not appreciated at the present juncture.

"Well?" asked Ralph, swinging his door partly open again.

"She's called again."

"Did she? When?"

" Why now—she's been waiting at the door this five minutes."

" Oh, has she ! " exclaimed Ralph. " This is a queer time—well, show the lady in. Perhaps it isn't soap or insurance, after all."

" She's an oldish woman—for you," remarked Mrs. Hicks, as if she were calculating the niceties of the situation to herself, " so—er—I'll show her into this room—your own room."

Ralph stared for a moment in half-amused amazement after the narrow form of his landlady, as she made her way to the front door in the hall. He had never had an unattended female visitor to his rooms before, and he had not considered the possibility of that excellent person acting in the rôle of Mrs. Grundy.

Presently Mrs. Hicks was at his door again.

" Here is the lady who wants to see you, Mr. Harding," she announced.

Ralph stood aside.

" Come in, madame," he said. " Thank you, Mrs. Hicks " ; then, bringing forward a chair for his visitor : " Won't you be seated ? "

The new-comer was somewhat as Mrs. Hicks had described, as regards dress ; that worthy lady had made no reference, however, to the caller's keen, dark eyes, or white flashing smile. Possibly she had not seen the latter.

The visitor seated herself with a murmur of thanks. Ralph took a chair near her.

"I come to see you," commenced the former, after noting Ralph's inquiring glance, "on a private matter—one of concern, as you might say."

She spoke with a quaint foreign accent. Russian, Ralph fancied. Her eyes searched Ralph's.

"Yes," he said, in order to fill in the pause which had followed, "and what is that?"

"But wait," said the woman, with a little start, commencing to fumble in her hand-bag, "you do not know my name. Here."

And she handed him a large, square-cornered card. Ralph read:

MADAME ASTRA,
Psychist & Character Reader.
Private sittings only.

He looked a trifle puzzled. He fancied he had heard of this woman—she was a society fortune-teller, or something of that sort—but he could not guess what she wanted with him. It could scarcely be in connection with the Lombardy Case. So far as he knew, his name, up to date, was well out of that, except with the esoteric few.

"I see you are troubled," said Madame, watching his expression. "Perhaps I can help you."

" I am a bit puzzled," replied Ralph. " Why should you want to see me ? "

" I have told you—to help you."

" To help me—what do you mean ? "

" There are dark things in your life just now. Perhaps Astra can throw a little light."

Ralph laughed, a trifle uneasily.

" I suppose we all have dark things in our lives, more or less. But we have to battle them out for ourselves, don't we ? I don't want to take up any more of your time——"

He had no intention of unburdening his mind to this woman. Women did such things, of course—actually sought these dealers in the mystic arts. Even men, at times, so he had heard, were not above consulting fortune-tellers. He had been told of a hard-headed business magnate who often sought the advice of a modern magician. But he had not come to that stage himself yet.

Still it struck him as strange that Madame Astra should have chosen this of all times to have solicited his confidences.

Possibly some girl—Phyllis Martel, perhaps—had given her his address as a joke, knowing his opinion of fortune-tellers. That would be some days ago, of course, and the woman had just chanced to pick on this time to come.

" I am afraid," he continued, " that I don't go in for this sort of thing "—he looked at the card which she had given him—" and I don't want to waste your——"

Madame showed her white teeth. Her smile could be a very engaging one.

" Do not worry," she said, " this is not an ordinary—sitting. I do not come for any fee. I come because perhaps I can help you. You listen to what I say. Then you will be—more confident in me."

She paused. Ralph inclined his head. It could do no harm for a few minutes.

" Very well," he conceded. " Go on. I am all attention."

" First of all," commenced Madame Astra, " it is right that you should hear that I know —more than it is given others to know."

Her eyes were alight with an exceptional lustre, and for the first time during the interview, Ralph felt a strange awe at the little woman's presence.

Her voice went on in an impressive monotone:

" There has been a murder, of which you are feared to speak; there is also a woman whom you seek in vain."

In spite of Ralph having, at the commencement of her speech, set his face into an expressionless mask, he gave vent to a surprised exclamation.

The speaker, however, held up her hand as a signal to refrain from interruption.

" Who committed the murder puzzles many people. Some people say no murder, just accident ; and police make two arrests. Those arrests are only for time being, perhaps. Temporary. I do not speak English too well. Sometimes I pick the wrong words. The police suspect somebody else. And the somebody else is just as innocent as the arrests. Then perhaps another person might do it, or another. One person who might do it—is the woman you seek."

" No ! " Ralph ejaculated, involuntarily.

" Yes ! That woman not happy, and she tell you her troubles. Her husband is—not the best husband, perhaps. Is that right ? "

" I don't know," replied Ralph slowly, " what sort of a husband he made." He did not even think to deny that he knew what she was talking about.

" But, you guess so, at times, eh ? " Madame Astra went on. " Yes, you do. This woman, she want to see you, and her husband found dead in your place of business. You there the same night. He is stabbed—yes, he is stabbed. Not a way a man like you would kill him, but perhaps a woman, yes—a woman who knows the East. Did the husband come to kill you ? "

Without knowing it, Ralph found himself replying to the little woman's questions.

" I don't know what on earth he was doing in that building. I had never seen him before."

" Perhaps she fear violence, and follow him up to save you. She run off, so as not to let you know that it was she killed him ; but you suspect, and go away next morning to find her, and help her, and again to-day. She much to you. But you are still puzzled and worried. There is something else that you look for, and cannot find. A letter. The letter is from her——"

Madame Astra stopped speaking suddenly, and her eyes, which had gradually become veiled under half-closed lids, resumed their normal alertness.

" Am I not right ? " she asked.

" Well," Ralph was bound to admit, " you hit the nail right on the head a few times. How on earth——"

" Oh—I just read the signs. Are you not confident in me now ? "

" Well," replied Ralph, speaking with forced deliberation, " what I would like to know is, how you came into this matter, and when ? "

" How ? " answered the soothsayer, " this matter concerns me pretty deep ; and when ? why from the beginning, we might say. Do you know who identify the victim of the murder ? "

" No. Funny thing. I never even wondered about it."

" You needn't start wondering now, then," said Madame Astra. " It was me ! "

"YOU!" Ralph could not refrain from an excited exclamation. "It was you who identified Lensker!"

"Yes," replied Madame Astra steadily, "I identify Michael Lensker."

"But——"

"Oh, I take no part in the tragedy. I have not seen him at all for ten months—a year. But when I read the account in the paper, somehow I know, and I go down to the morgue. It was Michael! Now I want to find who killed him!"

"So do I!" said Ralph grimly.

"At once I put my wits to work. My wits that for fifteen years I devote to Russia. This Astra no fool, young man. More than one man have I brought to the gallow or the *bastinado*."

A malicious gleam flickered for a moment in her eyes.

"At first I thought maybe you who killed him. Then perhaps it was his wife. I had heard of you. Now I see by your eyes that you did not do it. You think, too—you would swear, too—that *she* did not do it. I was not quite straight—frank—with you when I said I thought you went away to help her, perhaps to hide her. I only said that to test you. You believe her as innocent as—as that other girl you know."

Ralph winced. He did not like Diana's name being brought into the matter in such circumstances.

"Let us be frank. Let us help each other," the woman rattled on; "we both want to settle this business."

Ralph looked at his watch. It was a quarter to nine. Well, his visit to Russell Street, and the search for Mrs. Lensker's letter, must wait a little longer.

As if reading his thoughts, Madame Astra said:

"That letter—you will never find. The police have it. And if you are wise, you will not go near the police—just yet."

The other started in amazement. This keen-eyed little woman who had ferreted him out for her own peculiar ends had certainly the habit of making some very remarkable statements.

"Why?" was all Ralph could gasp.

"Why? I tell you. First of all, that letter—but let me begin at the beginnings. This morning I receive word to go down to the Detective Office. I do not wonder much. I have done work for the police here before, and anyhow I am already in this case.

"The police have found, in a secret pocket of the dead one's clothes, two letters. They are written in Russian. I am asked to translate. But those letters are from another Russian, who is also in Australia. They seem to be about business matters, and some money dealings over which there is argument.

"But while I am at work over those letters at a small table in Detective Buxton's room, in comes a young man, excited. I do not hear his name, for he gives a card to Buxton, who is sitting at his own table.

"My back is turning, so I do not see very much, but I hear nearly all.

"I work slowly and quietly, so that they might forget my presence.

"The young man says he has some light to throw on the Lombardy Mystery, but he wants his name kept out of it.

"Buxton tells him to go on.

"The young man mentions your name. He says that you were alone in your office that night with Michael Lensker's wife——"

"What!" cried Ralph.

"Yes, he said that. The detective asks him how he knows. He said that Lensker was his friend, and had told him of his great suspicion between you two. He was a jealous man (that is true!), and that maybe—well, that you had killed him on Lensker confronting you two together.

"The detective hums and hahs, and then asks the young man when he saw the dead man last.

" ' Oh, on Wednesday,' he said, ' on the night he was murdered. He had had dinner with me in the city and afterwards said he wanted to get hold of Harding '—that's you.

" ' What makes you so sure Mrs. Lensker was there ? ' asked Buxton.

" The young fellow hesitates a bit, and then said it was only from the way Lensker had spoken. ' Ask those other fellows that you caught at the building—Roach and Fiseley,' he says—' they ought to know ! '

" ' They reckon that they were locked out—and that girl and so on gave the impression that Harding didn't want any visitors that night,' says Buxton almost to himself. ' As a matter of fact, Mister, you haven't told us anything very new. We've been thinking somewhat the way you do for some time.'

" He rang a bell.

" ' Ask Mr. Hammond to come in with the letter we found in Harding's office on Thursday morning,' he said to the attendant.

" Presently Hammond—that little detective with the pig's eyes—brings the letter. They read it over, and I listen very carefully. I do not catch all ; but it comes from the dead man's wife, and it is signed ' Joan.' She is in trouble and wants to see you very bad.

" The two detectives nod their heads.

" ' He has kept out of the way since,' says Hammond.

" ' He was home last night,' says Buxton ; then he turned to the young man, ' Why didn't you come to us before ? ' he asks.

" The young fellow hesitates a little again. ' Well,' he says, ' it is only suspicion, and I didn't like——'

" ' Have you got nothing absolutely definite ? ' asks Buxton.

" ' Well, there is just——' he commences, when Hammond—I don't like that man—cuts in.

" ' Perhaps we had better come into my room,' he says, and I am sure that he is nodding towards me.

" Buxton only laughs, and then says, ' All right, if you like,' and all three of them get up and make for the door.

" As they go I try to get a look at the young man. I only see his back. He is—medium—not very tall, well dressed—black, shiny hair, but just like a hundred other young men. No—no distinction. . . .

" I tell you all this so that you—can tell where you stand."

" Good Lord ! " cried Ralph, " it seems as if they are trying to fix it on me all right. But Joan—Mrs. Lensker—was never near my office that night. How *could* she have been ? "

" She has a fast motor car," said Madame Astra shrewdly, " and can drive it herself."

" If she used it like that, how is it I went up to see her—and missed her—the next two days ? "

The little Russian shrugged her shoulders, and smiled reassuringly.

" *I* do not believe she see you then—or since," she said.

" Well, I haven't," said Ralph, " but I would very much like to. I feel, somehow, that she is in danger."

" Ah, yes—now. And so are you, young man. So are you. I do not want you to forget that."

" I am not likely to. But "—Ralph saw no harm in seeking the advice of this woman who had told him so much—" what is best to be done ? "

" Do not give yourself over to the police yet "—the other shuddered a trifle at the phrase —" for we have much yet to learn, and if you are—kept under guard it will spoil our chance of finding the real murderer. The police would not believe my suspicions. You are too easy a—a conviction for them."

" What are those suspicions ? " asked Ralph. He had so far purposely refrained from making any reference to his own experience of the night before, and his tentative conclusion regarding that and one or two other matters. He was naturally still not quite sure in his mind as to Madame's actual place in this scheme of things, and was leaving her to reveal, without any prompting from himself, any knowledge she might possess of the enigmatic events connected with the big Hudson motor-car.

Such a revelation would have been of particular significance.

It would have shown Madame Astra—unless she were possessed of powers magically deeper still than her exceptional faculty for observation and deduction—to have been in touch with the mysterious agency which Ralph supposed to be behind all the recent happenings. If she were, well, it would prove amongst other things that Ralph was on doubly dangerous ground.

" My suspicions, ah—they sound little to the unbelieving police. But to me they are almost truth. Listen ! "

The soft tread of Mrs. Hicks' footsteps going up the passage sounded from outside. Evidently the front-door bell had rung.

After an intent pause came the sound of the door being closed, and the returning steps.

" Ask her what it was," requested Madame, in a low, eager voice. Mrs. Hicks had already passed Ralph's door on her way back to the rear part of the house.

He complied, wonderingly.

"Oh, it was nothing at all," he smiled, a few moments later, re-seating herself. "It was only a man who came to the door asking if Mrs. Jones lives here. Mrs. Hicks said she thought there was a Mrs. Jones further up."

Madame Astra, however, did not regard this seemingly trivial incident as nothing.

"Mrs. *Jones* ?" she asked, with emphasis.

"Yes. Mrs. Jones."

"I must leave you in a very few minutes," was her surprising rejoinder. "Have you another way out—one where I cannot be seen from the front street ?"

"Why, yes," replied Ralph amazedly. "I believe you could go out through the back garden, and into the lane at the rear. But—but I don't know what Mrs. Hicks would say."

"Never mind this Mrs. Hicks. You will see me out, though ? Good. We must move quick. I have to go soon. You must excuse me. Now, listen. You do not go near police just yet. You must go back into the country"—the little Russian woman was speaking very incisively, almost as if she were a general giving rapid orders to his chief of staff—"not really into the country, just lay a false trail. Keep in touch with me. Here is my private house"—she handed Ralph a slip of paper on which a number of words were written—" come to me to-morrow night. There is more to tell, and plan. Now you want some money, while you are away. I not know how much you got but here are twenty-five pounds——"

Ralph held up his hand in protest.

" I do not need that," he declared. " Besides, there is my bank."

" You *might* need it, " Madame Astra went on, placing a bundle of notes on a small table near her, " and you must not go near your bank. That would be dangerous. By the time the banks open you must be out of the way. You can write me a cheque for this money—an open one that anybody can cash—and I will see that I am paid back in the morning."

Ralph thought deeply for a moment, then pulled out his cheque book. As he wrote, Madame Astra kept on talking.

" Do not forget your own danger—and the happiness of those you love. We will help each other, and all will come right. No, I can tell no more to-night ; I stay too long already. That cheque right ? Right. To-morrow night, then that paper will tell you. Come, now."

Madame Astra rose, and Ralph rose with her. He felt just a little flurried and " in the air," but the little woman's manner was so convincing that he could see no reason for objection.

He led the way down the passage and out into the small garden at the rear, regardless of the risk of scandalizing his good landlady.

Mrs. Hicks, however, had apparently nodded off over her paper or her knitting in her own little snuggery. Anyhow, she gave no signs.

At the back gate—one of those which had to be lifted a trifle on its hinges to make it swing easily—they paused.

"Which is the silentest way out?" asked Ralph's visitor.

"That way, to the left," he nodded, manipulating the gate cautiously; "it is grass covered most of the way and takes you out on to Domain Road. But let me see you on your way."

"No—that would not do. You stay here—till the morning. I go now."

"One thing," said Ralph, standing in the open gateway, "you must tell me before you go. Why are you so keen to find Lensker's murderer yourself, and all that?"

"Do you not know?"

"No, I do not. What is or was he to you?"

"He was to me," said Madame Astra, "just what his wife is to you."

And the next instant she was gone.

* * * * *

Ralph sat for long that night cogitating on his strange visitor.

Like the unknown young man's reported suspicions to the police, Madame Astra's warning to himself did not convey anything actually new. He had from the outset realized that he was living in a danger zone, as it were.

So far, however, from the soothsayer's visit making matters clearer, it had only seemed to make them more complicated.

If only she had not taken fright in the way she had, and cleared off, things could have been much more satisfactorily arranged in the one sitting.

Now he was left in a state of puzzledom, which was bound only to increase the more he thought about it, until he could see her again—the following night.

In the meantime he had strict injunctions to make himself scarce. The crumpled bundle of notes was still there on the little table. Mechanically he reached forward and pocketed them.

Ralph was tired and he could not think properly. His brain was not so clear as it ought to be—lack of sleep, and much travelling about. . . .

And here was he condemned to do more travelling about. . . . Why? . . .

Madame was a remarkable woman. . . . And she must be genuine, if what she had told him were true. . . . Yes, no wonder she wanted to settle with Lensker's murderer. . . . He felt the same way about Joan.

No, Madame was not trapping him. . . . Trapping him. . . . Dash it all, why did she run off like that?

Dash it all again, why couldn't he keep his eyes open . . . and think, see through things? . . .

Twenty-five pounds . . . and what he had in his pocket. To go away with. Before breakfast would be the best time, he supposed. But then there would be arrangements to make. The office, and all that. Thank goodness, Paydon was due back from Sydney. . . .

Deuced difficult things, arrangements. . . .

Poor little Diana—Dee. D for Dear. She was a dear, but she wasn't very little. . . .

Damn those arrangements. . . .

The next minute Ralph was asleep, his head sunk at an ungainly angle over his chest.

* * * * *

When he awoke, stiff and strange, in the morning it was late. The postman had already been.

In the mail was a letter. It was a letter which, to a large extent, crowded thoughts of Madame Astra out of his head.

It was a letter which decided Ralph to take early and determined action, because it demanded it.

It was action which, in the circumstances, Madame Astra herself could not have objected to.

It necessitated him "going away." So, for the third time, he went.

Chapter XII *The Inquest*

THREE days had elapsed since the visit of Madame Astra to Mrs. Hicks' establishment in Cygnet Street, and during that time nobody had seen nor heard from Ralph Harding.

Even the little Russian character-reader, who had so earnestly desired a renewal of the acquaintance so strangely made, had not yet received any call or word. But of course that was very private information of which Ralph's friends knew nothing.

Diana Allison sat at home in the little lounge where she had last seen Ralph. It was late on Monday afternoon, and a copy of an evening paper lay upon her lap.

She was alone.

Like certain of her friends she had not slept well lately—nor enjoyed life.

Into the gay circle of her acquaintance had crept tragedy, tragedy with its two attendants, horror and suspicion. Never before into these young lives had entered anything of the grimmer possibilities of existence.

Yet it was to Diana, one of the gayest and irresponsible of them all, that the realization of this came home with the greatest force.

The contents of the paper she had just read held for most of her friends a certain measure of relief ; but for her the trouble and anxiety which had so preyed upon her mind was increased a hundred-fold.

She had missed Ralph's society in the last few days—missed it terribly at a time when comfort from a strong man, as she believed him to be, was her greatest need. Her father, of course, in his bluff, military way, had seen that there was something wrong with the girl ; but his efforts at cheerfulness were not those of complete understanding.

What she wanted now was that new need of hers—the words of a lover. And it seemed, reading between the lines of that terrible report in the paper to-night, that she might never hear those words again. It was obvious that Ralph was, wherever he happened to be, in great danger —danger from the law. Yet he had asked her to trust him, a totally unnecessary request it seemed at the time. But now—— Anyhow, she must hope.

Diana picked up her long, ivory cigarette-holder from the little cloisonné ash-tray, which rested on the arm of her chair. The scarcely smoked cigarette in it had long since gone out, but she sucked mechanically at the mouthpiece.

She glanced again at the startling headlines in the open paper before her. She shuddered at their possible import :

INQUEST IN LOMBARDY CHAMBERS TRAGEDY
EARLY END TO INQUIRY
PECULIAR FINDING
OTHER CASE MAY HAVE BEARING ON THIS CASE

After a reiteration of the news already published, and a detailed description of the crowd waiting at the morgue since early morning, in the hope of getting seats inside during the inquiry, the account went on :

> However, the Press only were admitted, and the proceedings were unexpectedly short.
>
> Certain facts we are not at liberty to disclose, but evidence was given as to the finding of the body in the manner already described.
>
> The Government Medical Officer stated that it was his opinion that death was caused by a jagged wound in the left breast. Death had probably been instantaneous.
>
> Mr. Grant Evans (appearing for Messrs. Fiseley and Roach) : " Could the unprotected bolt which had been viewed by him near the lamp bracket on Mr. Roach's car have produced the wound ? "

Witness: "It could have, in certain circumstances."

Mr. Grant Evans: "What circumstances?"

Witness: "If it were driven with sufficient force, and the deceased's body were in such a position to receive the blow under the left shoulder."

Mr. Grant Evans: "Was the protruding bolt in such a place upon the car as to make it likely that the deceased should be so struck?"

Witness: "No."

Mr. Grant Evans: "Did the car look as if it had been washed down prior to your examination?"

Witness: "Well, it was fairly clean."

Mr. Grant Evans: "But not conspicuously so?"

Witness: "No."

G. Burrowes and H. Watkins, janitor and liftman respectively, gave evidence as to what occurred in the morning of Thursday, 23rd, and Senior Constable Tate was called.

Mr. Grant Evans: "When you were first shown the deceased's body in the lift, were there any marks upon his person, other than the fatal wound?"

Witness: "None, except a small, depressed scar——"

Mr. Grant Evans: "I mean, upon the clothing—was it dirty or dusty, as if the deceased had been knocked over and fallen on the road, for instance?"

Witness: "The clothes were not dirty."

Mr. Grand Evans: "You could describe them as spick-and-span, even?"

Witness: "I suppose so."

Certain evidence was given as to the movements of Messrs. Fiseley and Roach on the preceding night.

Both these witnesses admitted that they had had some drink during the evening, and that they did not remember being hailed by the police at any time.

They swore, however, that they had not entered Lombardy Chambers.

Inspector Williams: "If a constable swears that he heard you use the words 'Serves him right if we did him in for blocking our road,' what would you say?"

Fiseley: "I don't remember saying it."

Inspector Williams: "But suppose he swears it?"

Fiseley: "We could not have used those exact words, but we might have expressed some annoyance at not being able to get into the building."

Inspector Williams: "Annoyance against any one in particular?"

Fiseley: "I would rather not say."

Inspector Williams: "But you must say."

At this point Mr. Grant Evans leaned over and whispered to the Coroner, who then called Inspector Williams to him, and there was a short consultation.

The witness, after one or two other questions, was then ordered to stand down.

The last witness called was Madame Astra, of No. 43 Collins Street, who gave her profession as that of costumiere.

She had translated certain letters found in the pocket of the victim. Yes, she was a Russian—the countrywoman of deceased.

Mr. Grant Evans: "Was there anything threatening in those letters?"

Witness: "Well, you might call it a threat."

Mr. Grant Evans: "Was personal violence offered?"

Witness: "Not particularly. There were demands for money."

Mr. Grant Evans: "But strong demands?"

Witness: "Yes."

The Coroner and his assistants retired to consider the evidence, and at 12.20 brought in the following strange verdict:

"I find that Michael Lensker of Camlot Springs, Victoria, naturalized citizen of Australia, on the night of Wednesday, 22nd October, was done to death in a manner not sufficiently determined, and I leave the matter of finding those responsible for his death in the hands of the police."

Immediately after the conclusion of the proceedings, Messrs. Fiseley and Roach were released. It is understood that the police do not intend to proceed any further with the major charge against these two young men. Whether they propose taking action in connection with a much less serious (though all too dangerous) matter brought to light during the case, is not known. In any case, Messrs. Fiseley and Roach have much cause for congratulation. Doubtless they will be more wary in future how they combine conviviality and motoring.

The position is the mystery of the victim of Lombardy Chambers, which once showed signs of being dissipated, is now greater than ever. So far as the public is concerned, at any rate. The police have their theories, and it is surmised that these have been hurriedly revised owing to the new and surprising tragedy reported this morning from Nullabong Flat. Particulars of this are given in other columns of this paper.

In the meantime we hope that, however the body of Michael Lensker got into the automatic lift in Queen Street, and whatever was the cause of the tragedy, may be speedily brought to light. The police should not place too much reliance in the view that this fresh affair is any way connected with the former, and that, therefore, a solution to the one might be the means of elucidating the other.

A tenant of Lombardy Chambers, who it is believed may be able to throw some light on this case, has been missing from his home for the last few days, and the police so far have been unable to trace him. It is to be hoped that they do not lose sight of this fact.

There are other significant features in this case, and developments, when they do occur, will probably be startling.

* * * * *

The other case referred to by the paper was reported under large headlines as follows:

NULLABONG FLAT, Monday, 10 a.m. While looking for a stray horse at an early hour this morning, Mr. 'Dick' Haynes, who is employed by Mr. H. A. Westerby of Dalesbrook, to look after his farm near here, made a gruesome discovery. Searching amongst the old tailing-heaps of the deserted shallow workings, Haynes came across the body of a man. It was sprawled across some stones near a vacant shaft, and quite dead. Deceased had been fatally stabbed, for the instrument which had caused his death was still embedded in the left breast, beneath the arm.

Mr. Haynes immediately rode to the local Post Office to report the matter. The nearest Police Station is at Dalesbrook, eleven miles away, and the postmaster was knocked up and the police communicated with. At 8 a.m. Constable Malfy left Dalesbrook in a hired motor-car, and was not long in reaching the scene.

Deceased is believed to be a man known as Mackie or Mackay, and has not been long in the district. Why he should have been so done to death, nobody here knows. The weapon by which he met his end was a polished steel paper-knife. It is considered that much force must have been used in driving this home. Deceased, when discovered, had been dead for many hours. Probably the tragedy occurred early the previous night.

There are signs of a struggle near where the victim was found. Three important clues, besides the paper knife, have been discovered. One was a large dress stud, believed to be a diamond, which was found by Constable Malfy held in the victim's mouth, of all places.

The second is an empty beer bottle which lay a few yards away. As, however, the paper label is missing off this, probably it has nothing to do with the case and has been lying exposed to the weather for some considerable time.

The third clue is considered an important one. This consists of a hat, which was found about twenty yards away from the victim. The deceased was hatless, but the headgear discovered was about three sizes too large for him, and of a very well-known make, incompatible with the rest of his clothing. There are certain initials stamped in the band of the hat, which are not those of the person whom the dead man is believed to be, and these will probably be an important factor in elucidating the case.

The strictest investigations are being pushed forward.

Later. It is understood that Detectives Buxton and Hammond are being despatched from the city to take over the case.

The initials stamped in the hat found near the victim are "R.G.H.," and the hatter's name is that of a well-known establishment in Melbourne.

Such was the news, baldly expressed, which confronted Diana Allison.

The last sentence burned into her brain—"R.G.H." Those letters were Ralph Harding's initials.

No wonder she sat, like one overwhelmed, and wondered and wondered. . . .

The inference contained in the paper's two reports was obvious. Both cases were somehow connected with Ralph.

She felt a sudden desire to get up, and do something, to wave her arms about, scream, anything. . . .

If only she could know where he was, why he had disappeared, what it was all about!

Ralph had asked her to trust him, and she did. But had he trusted her, sufficiently? There was more that he could have told, but he did not. He had gone away without a word to her. And now this horrible thing had happened.

Surely, surely there must be some rational explanation for it all. In some manner, Ralph had been caught into a net, and could not escape from it. Some queer bit of business that he had had no proper inkling of before first engaging upon it. He had told her before of one or two little propositions—company promotion, and that sort of thing—that he had fought shy of because of their unsavoury possibilities. Perhaps this was something more subtle than he had previously encountered.

Diana had the vaguest notions of business.

All she knew was that her lover was in danger, that all men's hands would soon be turned against him, and that she, too, should their relationship become more widely known, might share some of the ostracism of the pariah.

But he had asked her to trust him, and any expressed pity for her would only serve to strengthen her silent support of the one who was absent and could not speak for himself.

Diana resolved that the usual expressions that she expected to receive would not shake her in her attachment to Ralph.

Since this cloud had fallen, Diana Allison had received the second deep emotion she had experienced in her young life.

Chapter XIII *At Nullabong Flat*

WHEN Detectives Buxton and Hammond arrived at Nullabong by the afternoon train, on Monday, 27th October, they were met at the station by Constable Malfy, in a hired motor-car.

Nullabong Flat is three miles by dusty road from the station, and the scene of the gruesome find was about half a mile further on from the township itself.

The body had been removed in a spring cart to a room in the back of the weather-board Post Office, and it was there that the detectives repaired first.

Although Buxton was nominally the senior of the two visiting officers, it was Hammond who did most of the initial talking. The former appeared content to puff away at the largest size in cheroots, listen to all information with a rather engaging smile, and ask an occasional question. His frank blue eyes, however, concealed a keenness that was not often apparent to the casual observer.

Hammond darted glances this way and that, moved about fussily, and picked up and inspected articles several times before being satisfied with his examination. Like most little men, he was quick in his speech.

" What is this ? " he asked, after he and his colleague had examined the corpse. " The weapon that did it ? " He held up a thin steel instrument about a foot in length. Several inches of the finer end were stained and sticky.

Malfy, the Dalesbrook constable, nodded. " A paper-knife all right, isn't it ? "

" Hm ! " murmured Hammond ; then, turning to Buxton : " This could have killed Lensker, Pete."

Peter Buxton smiled his concurrence.

Hammond again spoke :

" Anything in deceased's pockets, Malfy ? "

" Over there," replied the constable, " on that chair."

On the hard, wooden bottom of the rough piece of furniture was a small heap of miscellaneous articles—a stub of a pencil ; a crumpled envelope ; half a packet of cheap cigarettes ;

a few loose coins; and a magnificent diamond dress-stud.

In those sordid surroundings it seemed incongruous that such a beautiful specimen of the jeweller's art should be found. The victim himself was so shabbily dressed, and the rest of his few possessions so dingy.

"I found it in his mouth," explained Malfy, shortly, indicating the glittering ornament.

"And if it could speak—either the mouth or the stud," Hammond rattled away complacently—"doubtless it could explain a lot of things. However, it tells us much even now."

"How did you come to look in his mouth?" asked Buxton.

"I could see a slight bulge in his cheek, so I searched for a reason. That was all."

"I see. And this envelope. Was there anything in it?"

"No. At least, it seems absolutely flat."

"No bulges, eh? Well, there is something in it. Have a look."

The constable peered into the gaping envelope which the other held, between widely extended finger and thumb, towards him.

"I am afraid I can't see much," he said slowly.

"No? What about these—those two red stains on the inside? Of course they might mean nothing at all; but everything's worth looking at. The address—at least, where some one has started to write an address—is decidedly interesting."

"'Burrow—'" read out Malfy. "Yes, I noticed *that.* But why should it be an address?"

"You think it might be some instructions to somebody—to dig, or something like that? I don't. See the blot at the end of the word?—that is, in all probability, why the envelope was discarded, and another one chosen. Only for that blot, the name might have read 'Burrowes' and the address—can you guess Mr. Burrowes' address?"

"Can't say that I can." Malfy looked somewhat puzzled. "And why didn't they say 'Mr.' Burrowes, or give some initial?"

"They didn't know his initial. Don't you see the faint dash in front of the word? The polite writer of this envelope was going to put '— Burrowes, Esq.,—Lombardy Chambers, Queen Street.' Eh, Hammond?"

"Knowing what we know now, certainly I agree with you," concurred his colleague. "This all serves to make the case blacker against our young friend from the top floor."

Buxton frowned the faintest trifle, but did not offer any further comment on that score. Instead he went on:

"You found no matches on him, Malfy?"

The constable shook his head.

" His fingers are deeply stained with constant smoking, and he carries Capstans," mused the detective, " but no matches. . . . What have you found out about the man himself ? "

" I have made all the inquiries I could in the time," said Malfy, " and the—the victim does not seem to be well known in the district. His name is Mackay, though—or that is what he was known as. He is only a new arrival about here, and was not often seen. Works—worked for various people—sort of odd job man—but never for very long. He left old Peterson's about a week ago, saying he was going to town, and nobody has seen him about since."

" Did he ever get any letter from—from other parts of the State, or abroad ? " asked Hammond.

" I don't know," replied the other.

" Did he have any enemies—get into any brawls, or anything ? "

" Not that I could hear about."

" You knew Michael Lensker, didn't you, who lived just about this distance out of Dalesbrook ? "

" Oh, yes, rather well, by repute, but his place is in the other direction—Camlot Springs. I——"

" Did Mackay ever have anything to do with Lensker—work for him, for instance ? "

"Not that I know of. I believe Lensker employed no men. A girl who I'm friendly with——"

"By the way, you haven't found any trace of Mrs. Lensker yet, have you?"

"None at all. I was going to continue my searches to-day when this case interrupted me."

"You are having rather a busy time up this way lately."

Constable Malfy smiled for the first time since the arrival of the two visiting detectives.

"Just what I want," he said, with the air of one who revels in an opportunity to show what he can do. "When I was sent up from the city, I was afraid that things were not going to be very exciting."

"There may be plenty of excitement coming yet," remarked Buxton, in his easy drawl. "But of course it's not just entertainment of that kind we are after."

Malfy, not quite sure whether this were a snub or not, looked as if he were about to express a protest, when he was quelled by the expression of the other's face.

"It seems to me," Buxton went on, smiling reassuringly, while Hammond regarded them both with an impatient frown, "that this is a case where tact and bluff are required, and not too much of a display of efficiency. At first, at any rate."

"I don't quite get you," chipped in Hammond, a trifle sharply.

"No? Well, there's no need to get excited about it. That's my tip. You see, I'm wondering about that hat——"

"This hat here?" and the other detective held up the headgear that had been picked up near the body of the victim.

"R.G.H.'s? No. I mean Mackay's hat. Surely he must have had one."

"Well, where could it be?"

"Down one of the open shafts, I suppose," suggested Malfy. "He was lying very close to an old claim when he was found."

"How could it get there?"

"Rolled down in the scuffle—or blown down by the wind, I suppose."

"Was it a windy night last night?"

"No, it was pretty still, as a matter of fact."

"Just enough wind for one, but not enough for two, as it were? However, we shall see more when we get out to the scene of the tragedy. But before we go, I should like to have a few words with the man who found the body. You have got him outside, haven't you?"

"Wouldn't it do out there?" asked Hammond, "not in here."

"There is something I want to ask him now. Bring him in."

Malfy nodded, and left the room.

Presently he returned with a sombre-looking countryman, whose none-too-cleanly shaven face had a curious set expression to it. He looked like a person of simple mind who was capable of harbouring one main idea only. In this case, that idea seemed to be a long-harboured grudge against some person or persons unknown; or possibly this grudge was only against his luck at the races, or the weather.

Mr. Dick Haynes was introduced to the two detectives. He greeted them gruffly, and showed none of that excitement which most dwellers in the provinces would have evinced under similar circumstances. His manner, in its own peculiar way, was perfectly natural.

He came in his shirt-sleeves, his coat apparently having been discarded on account of the warmth of the afternoon, or in accordance with common bush custom.

After a few preliminary questions, Buxton asked:

" Did you have a good look at the deceased before you left him to give the alarm this morning ? "

" Er—how do you mean ? " Haynes' intellect seemed of the slow-to-grasp order.

" I mean, did you examine him closely ? "

" I never touched him at all."

" Did you have a good look at his face ? Why I ask is, you said you did not know who the man was when you first found him, but now, when you have a clearer and a less—er—perturbed view of him, perhaps you might recall having seen the man before? I believe he worked about the district."

"I might have seen him somewhere," answered the witness slowly. "Of course, I see a lot of people passing along the road. But I don't remember his name."

"Who first recognized him?" asked Hammond.

"The Postmaster," replied Malfy.

Buxton continued:

"By 'examine' him, I didn't mean 'go through him.' He was lying on his side, with his face against the ground, when you first saw him, wasn't he?—just as he was when Constable Malfy here arrived. I know you didn't go through his clothes, because you surely would have noticed *that*."

And the detective pointed to the "exhibits" placed upon the chair bottom.

For an instant Haynes did not see the diamond, but when he did his face underwent a strange contortion. Apparently this taciturn creature had gone so long without feeling surprise that he did not know how rightly to express it.

Here, possibly, was another grudge he had against his luck. To have such a valuable thing within his grasp, as it were, with nobody needing to be any the wiser——

As if sensing something of this sort, Buxton said, half banteringly:

"It is just as well you are an honest man, Mr. Haynes—or you might have been tempted. That diamond's the real thing!"

"Where—did you get it on him?" gasped the other.

Hammond was about to speak, when his colleague anticipated him. Hammond's points were sometimes too fine.

"Oh, yes, we found it, along with those other trinkets."

Haynes, who now seemed to have become reconciled to the fact, merely nodded.

"You don't know anybody around here who has lost a stud like that?" Buxton included all his hearers in the question; but it was Malfy who answered.

"No, no losses have been reported."

The detective then produced a mounted photograph from his pocket.

"You don't know the victim, but perhaps you have seen this man, Mr. Haynes," he said, holding the picture out for inspection.

The countryman paused a moment while he glued his eyes upon the likeness. For the second time he almost displayed surprise.

"Yes," he said emphatically, "I've seen this fellow all right. He called at my place yesterday morning. Asked the way to old Peterson's. I told him straight down past those old workings."

"You are sure?"

"Positive that's the fellow. He wore a—yes, a hat like that," and Haynes pointed to the hat which held the initials R.G.H.

The two detectives looked at each other.

"I see—and how was he travelling?"

"Per boot—on foot."

"And he disappeared in this direction?"

"Yes, he came down through the township, and then I lost sight of him. But he went towards the workings all right."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, pretty early. Before nine o'clock. I hadn't finished my breakfast over an hour."

"He didn't tell you what he wanted with Peterson?"

"He just said something about a friend of his who was working there, that's all."

"I see. By the way, Malfy, did you see this photograph?"

The local constable examined the picture with interest.

"I, too, have seen this man," he exclaimed eagerly. "What's more, he was up at Lenskers' house on Friday, fishing for information. Let me think; he was a reporter. Seems he's been lurking around in this district for the last few days."

"Yes," said Buxton, "he has certainly not been lurking around about his own home. That is the man we are looking for. Name of Harding."

Chapter XIV *The Paper-Knife Murders*

IT was after five o'clock when the three officials, and the witness, Haynes, went to the scene of the tragedy.

There was still, however, plenty of daylight left.

The disused workings of Nullabong Flat occupied a fairly large area about Nullabong Creek, some half mile from the small township.

The main Melbourne Road—here passing through lightly timbered country—goes within fifty yards of the nearest claims.

It was further in, to a spot out of sight behind a belt of sugar-gums, that the small party went.

"Here," said Malfy at last, "was where the corpse was found."

He pointed to the bottom of a tailing heap which lay between two shafts. One shaft was partially covered with beams—apparently to afford the "protection" required by law—while the other, twenty yards away, was surmounted by the remains of a meagre poppet-head.

"That right?" asked Hammond, looking at Haynes. The latter nodded.

"You can see," Malfy went on, "some blood on that stone there."

The senior detective bent down and examined a dark stain which appeared upon some pieces of quartz-like rock. Then, moving about upon his knees, he looked closely at the ground around, touching one or two places with his fingers.

Hammond contented himself with picking up a bit of quartz, and inspecting it in his hand.

"Now," said Buxton at length, "show me the place where the hat was found. You needn't all come."

The constable led him a short distance to where, near the open shaft beneath the poppet-head, a small stick was driven into the ground.

"That marks the spot," said Malfy.

"Did you put that stick in?" asked Buxton.

"Yes, to show——"

"Good idea," murmured the detective, getting to his knees again. This time he examined a wider circle of ground and twice he slipped some tiny objects into a vest pocket. Then he got to his feet, and took a general survey of the place.

"Oh, and where was the bottle found—the beer bottle?" he asked a few minutes later, when once more the four men formed a small group.

"Just there, in that small patch of grass, beside those tailings," replied the constable, pointing to a place near where the gruesome discovery had been made.

Buxton examined that, too, in turn; then came back to the others.

In the meantime Hammond addressed Haynes:

"No mines at all working on this flat now?"

"No."

"Nobody has any occasion to come amongst these old workings now?"

"No. Unless they had a horse or something grazing here."

"By the way, did you find the horse you were looking for this morning?" asked Buxton casually.

"Yes, I'd got him before I found the bloke," Haynes replied. "The old postmaster can tell you that."

"Why, was he with you?" asked Hammond quickly.

Haynes looked confused. "No," he answered slowly. "He wasn't—why?"

"Oh, it's all right, Hammie," said Buxton cheerfully. "Mr. Haynes means that the postmaster saw him with both horses when he knocked him up this morning, isn't that so?"

"That's right," concurred Haynes. "I wouldn't go looking for the blanky thing after—after what I'd seen, would I?"

"Not likely!" agreed the detective. He did not wish to hurt the sombre bushman's feelings, a thing which he was afraid his less tactful colleague might do. Haynes was a most valuable witness.

"Well," he went on, "I think we've found everything about here, except the dead man's hat. If nothing turns up in the morning—I mean, if the man we are looking for isn't caught, and his description has been sent to all the likely places from here that he might pass through—I shall come back and search for that hat. It might be down one of these shafts——"

"Why should his hat be so important?" asked Hammond.

"I don't know, until I find it—or assure myself that it cannot be found. They are all little links, Hammie, my boy. Now let's shift back to the township. We might look you up again in the morning, Mr. Haynes."

At the little Post Office building, the shirtsleeved farmer left them, making his way up the road towards his own place.

The two detectives and the policeman entered the room at the back.

"Well, we haven't got much further," remarked Hammond, fussily picking up the fatal weapon from amongst the "exhibits," "I mean, as far as evidence is concerned; we've got quite enough to convict Harding, though, once we lay hands on him."

"It looks as if he's the man all right," said Buxton, fumbling in his pocket. "And we certainly want to get him. Malfy, ask the postmaster if any news has come through on the wires."

While the policeman was absent, Buxton laid several small objects with the rest on the chair bottom. They were six "dead" safety matches and a brown composition coat button, with some threads attached.

"Get 'em out there?" asked Hammond casually.

"The matches, yes," answered the other, "but the button was on him"—nodding towards the still figure beneath the sheet—"it was something Malfy missed."

"I went through deceased's pockets before you," said Hammond in a surprised tone; "it was funny that I missed it."

"That button was in the cuff of Mackay's trouser legs," replied Buxton, " and that's why neither of you found it. But—hullo, Malfy, any news ? "

The Dalesbrook constable was standing in the doorway, his face alight with excitement.

" No, not over the wires," he answered, " but —I have just thought of something. That thing Mr. Hammond is holding there, the paper-knife. I have seen it, or its exact counterpart, not so very far from here, and on the day that the man Harding paid a visit to me at Camlot Springs. It was on a writing table in Mrs. Lensker's house, and Harding was with me at the time I noticed it. I remember him picking it up and passing some remark about it ! "

Hammond looked at Buxton. " So we have progressed with our evidence, after all," exclaimed the former. " We don't need to worry about anything except getting our man. And he shouldn't give much trouble. We have everything now except the motive. But doubtless that can be found in due course—eh, Malfy ? "

The constable nodded emphatically, pleased that he had made such a good impression with his announcement.

Buxton, however, remarked gravely : " It seems to me that there are too many motives in this case, Hammie. That's the trouble."

"Too many? I don't see that. We're sure of our man; and *why* he did it—well, that's not really our concern, anyway. But what are these motives?"

Buxton produced a cigar-case, and, after meeting with a refusal to participate from each of his associates, selected and carefully lit a weed.

Then he spoke slowly:

"Take the case of Lensker first. It may have been jealousy—Harding was evidently pretty thick with his wife; or it may have been self-defence—Lensker perhaps was after Harding's blood; or maybe robbery—there are those missing valuables. But if Lensker's wife was in Harding's office, it's possible that *she* might have done it—out of fear, or hate, when they were disturbed. In that case Harding would have been an accessory, both during and since. We have evidence that Lensker was a violent and jealous man; so his wife, in coming to see Harding, brought that steel knife with her—probably one of a pair. Taking the man's possessions may have been a blind—either as to motive, or in the hope that he would not be identified for some time, as he was not well known in the city. Or perhaps they really wanted them.

"The second murder is the corollary of the first. I'm dead certain on that point. The cause may either have been robbery—Mackay being in possession of a valuable jewel suggests that; or, more likely, there may have been a dispute over disposing of Lensker's valuables, and Mackay—possibly a 'fence' for Harding—tried to show a point and copped out.

"But what is more likely still is that Mackay, being apparently a shiftless sort of person, and one who had been moving about this district for some little time, in some way had got to learn of the intrigue between Mrs. Lensker and Harding. Perhaps he was some sort of a go-between for them, such as illicit lovers sometimes have. Anyhow, he might have known or guessed the cause of Lensker's death, and come at blackmail. The diamond stud which he had may have been an attempt to buy his silence; an attempt which was subsequently mistrusted, surer methods being adopted. . . . What do you think of that theory?"

"Sounds good enough," concurred Hammond. "And how do you explain the envelope found in deceased's pocket addressed to Burrowes, the janitor of Lombardy Chambers?"

"Perhaps it was through Burrowes that Mackay got some of his information. Possibly old pals, who were working together, one at each end of the Harding—Mrs. Lensker liaison, for their own purposes."

Hammond nodded in agreement.

" Must question Burrowes further," he commented. " It struck me all the while that he was holding something back."

" He has been drinking pretty heavily the last couple of days," remarked Buxton, " which is quite unusual, I believe."

" Do you think it possible," Malfy broke in suddenly, " that Burrowes—he was the man that found Lensker first, wasn't he ?—robbed the body and sent the stuff up to his pal Mackay, here, to get it out of the road ? "

Hammond turned a rather black look upon the constable.

" I don't think we had better indulge in any side theories," he said brusquely. " From now on you had better concentrate on your search for Mrs. Lensker, that—er—we interrupted for you."

Malfy looked abashed at this, but the bigger detective, placing his hand in not unfriendly fashion upon his shoulder, smiled, saying :

" And if you find her, you will have done a bit of work that will earn recognition. But I do not think it is much good dragging any more creeks."

But in spite of the fact that Constable Malfy, in obedience to instructions, continued his search for the missing Mrs. Lensker with unabated vigour ; and in spite of the persistent efforts of the two detectives in charge of the case, and the army of assistants throughout the country, who watched continually for the appearance of the wanted young man, there were not any real developments in what was becoming known as the "Paper-knife Murders" for the best part of a week.

The papers sang their usual dirges about the inefficiency of the Force, and offered various theories and suggestions; the public discussed the matter in all its angles, and hoped the murderer might soon be caught; while the nature of the case seemed more sordid than ever.

From the blazing glamour of mystery, when first the news of an immaculate corpse found unaccountably in a lift was bruited abroad, to an ordinary type of low-class intrigue, the affair deteriorated. To the public, without any fresh development to keep the interest at fever-heat, the topic lost its sparkle.

Most people now knew (unofficially) the name of the man who was wanted by the police—the missing tenant of Lombardy Chambers, who had undeniably been present in the building at the time the dead body was there. And they knew, too, that the dead man's wife was missing. The multifarious other little details in this case did not affect these two salient points.

The nature of the case was getting more sordid every day.

Only Diana Allison, deliberately cut off from most of her friends, believed in Ralph's innocence—she, and Hal Roach, the missing man's nearest friend.

The Fiseleys half-believed, but that was not enough; and many others professed that they were "astounded," and that "they could not understand a fellow like Harding, etc." For them, Ralph's two staunch friends expressed silent contempt.

What was friendship if it could not stand a test—any test? But Diana's feelings went much deeper than those of ordinary friendship, and it was for that very reason that her period of testing was the harder to bear, and the more difficult to weather. . . .

When the next development did come, it promised great possibilities. It was in the form of a letter, addressed in crude handwriting to Mr. Ralph Harding, c/o Mrs. Hicks, Cygnet Street, South Yarra.

This was intercepted and opened by the police on the Saturday morning following the visit of Detectives Buxton and Hammond to Nullabong. It was postmarked "Melbourne."

The contents were simple, but straight to the point. The letter read:

"MR. HARDING,—

"Unless you ante up some more cash I'll split."

There was no signature. But the detectives were sure they would find out where the letter came from.

Chapter XV *Phyllis Martel's Surprise*

THE Martels were giving a garden party, and Diana Allison had been persuaded to join it. It was really the first form of entertainment she had indulged in since Ralph's trouble had come upon her, and it was only reluctantly she consented to go.

"You'll only get dippy, old thing, if you mope about at home much longer," Phyllis Martel exclaimed, in persuading her to accept the invitation. "Why stagnate like this?"

"Oh, Phyllis, you do not know how I feel about things. I couldn't enjoy myself, and I'd only make people feel miserable."

"Tut, tut! and fie, fie! You make us feel miserable without you. You'll enjoy yourself all right if you come."

Hal Roach—a much chastened Hal Roach since the night of his fateful visit to Lombardy Chambers—added his solicitations. He had brought Phyllis around to Diana's house in his car.

"You won't do any good by thinking too much about things, Di," he said. "And I am sure Ralph, wherever he is, will want you to remain your usual self for—for when things are cleared up."

"That's right," added Phyllis, clapping her hands lightly, with an effect of gaiety, "and I've got one or two little surprises for you, Di. You'll be glad you came."

"Oh, all right," consented Diana wearily. She was not in the mood for frivolity, yet she did not want to disappoint those two friends of hers. Perhaps they were right. She did no good by being miserable. It certainly did not help matters.

"Tarawei," the Martel home in the fashionable suburb of Heyington, stood on the heights overlooking a wide sweep of the river. From that distance the stream itself looked clear and pellucid, with green trees and fresh spaces marking its course. But for beauty the eye did not need to roam beyond the spacious grounds and well-set-out gardens in which the house—a superb structure—was built.

Sir John Martel, after attaining riches and a knighthood for his achievements in the legal profession, had engaged a landscape gardener in setting up his new home; and it must be confessed that that designer of floral beauty had done his work well. Lawns, rockeries and plantations were arranged with such cunning artistry that it made one wonder how such an effect of space and tireless variety could be gathered into a mere three acres of suburban land.

This Saturday afternoon the grounds were more brilliant than ever before.

Gaily coloured marquees had been erected and a temporary bandstand—composed largely of bamboos and wire, festooned with flowers—concealed a hidden orchestra.

Even the tennis courts at the side were decorated for the occasion, while the croquet lawn—the haunt of the "less young" of the fair sex—was embellished with paper streamers which rustled over the players' heads.

As Diana arrived, and was greeted enthusiastically by her young hostess, whose slim, blonde beauty was set off by a most becoming gown of powder-blue, she could not help thinking how strange it was for the world to carry on with its pleasures, its games, its frivolities, while underneath it all, at the same hour, at the same minute, while careless laughter was at its height, hearts were being broken and bitter tragedies enacted.

Was it sheer callousness on the part of these people, or just ignorance, that they let nothing deter them from their empty pleasures? Perhaps, however, it was just as well that the world should continue its gaieties. The tears of one person cannot wash away the griefs of another.

With a mental shrug of her shoulders, Diana dismissed these half-formulated thoughts, and turned her attention to the scene around her. It was no good her coming, as she had promised, if she were going to let outside things obtrude too much upon her mind.

"There are Madge and Jack Fiseley," said Phyllis, nodding towards a group of deck chairs under a shady tree. "They have just finished a game of tennis. Go and join them; I'll be with you soon."

Diana strolled over to where the brother and sister were, and, after giving and receiving compliments as to the pleasing nature of their respective dresses, sat down alongside Madge.

It was soon apparent that his experience in connection with the tragedy had not had the effect upon Jack that it did upon Hal Roach. Jack was slightly under the influence of whisky even then, and he blamed the fact of having had too many "spots"—or not enough—for being beaten in the game just concluded.

"Ralph Harding was the only chap that could beat me properly," he declared rather pompously. "Of course the blighter always looked after himself so well, so he ought to. By the way, Di, have you heard——"

Madge Fiseley tapped her brother warningly on the knee.

"Heard what?" asked Diana shortly. It came as a stab of pain to hear her lover's name spoken of so lightly.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," replied young Fiseley. "I was just going to ask if you had heard from him of late. But how could you, I mean —— Anyhow, it was a stupid thing of me to say, wasn't it? I'm always saying stupid things. Ask Madge. Here's Cyril Clarke coming. He'll—he'll be pleased to see you. You'll excuse me going? I want to pay my respects to Sir John. See you later."

"He's been paying his respects to Sir John a bit too much already," remarked Madge, looking after the retreating figure of her brother. "Old Sir John has been tapping his private cellar a little bit more frequently than usual since his wife has been away. Phyllis told me——"

Whatever exclusive bit of scandal Phyllis Martel had told about the grass-widower, her father, was cut short by the arrival of Cyril Clarke, looking the very apotheosis of spruceness.

He seated himself in the chair just vacated, and to Diana's surprise and relief made no reference at all to the matter she had uppermost in her mind.

The three chatted gaily on general topics for a few minutes. Diana having partaken of a raspberry "Sundae," which Cyril got up to bring her—it was quite a hot day for the first of November—she felt much like her usual self, with a zest for youthful companionship and enjoyment stirring again within her.

"Let's take a stroll around!" she suggested.

Madge Fiseley excused herself—she was due for a mixed doubles shortly—but the other two arose, and mingled with the moving crowd of guests.

In the centre of a lawn a new kind of game was in progress. Diana and her companion hurried to the spot, attracted by shouts of laughter.

It was merely a fishing competition, but with a unique condition attached to it.

A large rocky pool, fed by a weed-grown fountain, contained a considerable number of tame goldfish, once the pride (with other things) of the absent Mrs. Martel. Phyllis had decided that a new lot of goldfish would be easy to get, so her very tractable father had made no objections.

The feature of the competition was that it was a "mixed" event—a ladies' nomination contest. The man, who held the rod and line, was blindfolded; his lady partner stood by and watched the floater. When a bite occurred, the fair watcher immediately informed her swain—

by any means considered expeditious—and the swain thereupon attempted to hook the fish.

The resultant game had at least plenty of incident. Sometimes a girl watched the wrong floater, and a rival caught a fish; sometimes lines got tangled in mid-air, owing to the inability of the hoodwinked anglers to see exactly what they were doing. Anyhow, everything added to the hilarity of the occasion.

Diana forgot, for the time being, the shadow that was hanging over her.

Once, when two floaters bobbed at once, she nearly shouted instructions to the fishermen herself.

Presently, when the band on the top lawn struck up loudly with a cheery air from a popular light opera, her feelings thrilled in sympathy.

"Let us move round a bit more," she cried, touching Cyril Clarke on the arm, with a quick, impulsive gesture that was essentially hers, "and see whom we can see."

As usual, many admiring glances were cast in Diana's direction as they passed on to view the other attractions at "Tarawei" that day. The girl's simple dress of white georgette, slashed with a brilliant sash of yellow, showed off her tall figure to perfection. She walked like a queen—or a princess, rather, for Diana Allison in her best moments irradiated youth. At all other times she depicted it; but in her happiest moods that elusive spirit seemed to surround her like an aura.

Such was her carriage that the man beside her, though quite as tall as Diana actually, seemed shorter. However, Cyril Clarke had his share of admirers amongst the opposite sex, and to-day he seemed to have set out to be especially pleasing.

The two recognized many acquaintances. Everybody seemed happy. The music was good; the weather was delightful; the drinks were cool; and means for amusement were many.

Phyllis Martel, for one so young, had done wonderfully well to arrange such a successful show. Her father, by doing nothing except giving his consent to all her proposals, had been a great help to her.

As she turned into a little path near the bottom of the grounds which led to a lookout over the river, Diana heard her name called.

Her young hostess, accompanied by Hal Roach, was hurrying along behind them. The latter did not look very pleased when he saw who Diana's companion was. But then, young Clarke was not very popular with many men.

" Why, Di, we've been looking for you every-where," Phyllis exclaimed, somewhat breathlessly. "I thought you would still have been on the deck-chairs."

"Oh, I got restless," smiled Diana, "and Cyril offered to take me for a walk. Phyllis, I congratulate you; everything is going beautifully."

"Thanks, Di. I am glad you are enjoying yourself. Or you look as if you are. But I had a little surprise I was going to let loose upon you. Hal here doesn't quite approve, but then he's getting quite stern lately."

"Oh, I like things that people don't approve of, usually," cried Diana, her dark eyes flashing with fleeting mockery at Hal, who merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled cheerfully. "Tell me what it is, Phyl."

"Really nothing very serious," responded that young person; "but come along with me, and I'll show you. We'll leave these two old things to themselves, to smoke or follow us along later."

Phyllis led the way up nearly to the house, then through a fernery where luxuriant fronds and creepers made everything within cool and dim. At the far end was a lattice gate which opened into a small but thick shrubbery. In the centre of this was a fairly spacious square-roofed tent. The sides, hanging loosely, were of a thick, black-striped material, while the roof itself appeared fashioned in stars and other celestial symbols.

Holding a finger to her lips, Phyllis lightly stepped a few paces ahead, and placed her head through the split which served for a doorway.

" Are you there, Madame ? " Diana heard her say ; then " I have brought her."

Apparently receiving a favourable response, Phyllis Martel turned to her companion.

" There is somebody in here who has asked to see you," she whispered. " She says she has some good news for you." The girl's pretty but rather shallow face was animated with excitement. " Don't go out the other way ; you'll get on to the lawn if you do. Come back this way and I'll wait for you in the fernery."

The sheer ingenuousness of her friend's expression prevented Diana from feeling any annoyance at so much being taken for granted on her behalf, and so, nodding acquiescence, she simply parted the canvas entrance, and went in.

Rugs and cushions, gaily coloured, were spread about on the ground within. Seated on a portable divan, upholstered in some soft orange material, was a little dark woman with amazingly piercing eyes. Before her was a tall, three-cornered table ; at the rear of the divan was suspended a thick plush curtain, orange-coloured too. On the table were a crystal bowl, a box of matches, and a small quaint-looking ebony box.

In response to a sign, Diana seated herself upon one of the largest cushions. It yielded comfortably to her form, and, strangely enough, gave rise to a feeling of confidence in the occupant of the tent.

The woman spoke :

" You know me—do you not ? "

" You are Madame Astra, aren't you ? I saw you about a fortnight ago with Miss Martel," replied Diana.

" That is so—then you were not quite—convinced of me. I was puzzled with you. But now you are puzzled—and worried."

For a moment, Diana considered the advisability of withdrawing then and there from the presence of Phyllis's fortune-teller. She had not sought or even consented to this interview, and why should she let her affairs and her feelings be probed in this heartless manner by a stranger—a professional dealer in cheap emotion ? But Madame Astra's next remarks decided her on remaining.

" I told you true things last time ; I tell you more. I told you your man, your lover, was away, and would be away. He still away, and may be some time."

The lids were now down about the woman's half-closed eyes.

"I told you you are jealous. You did not think so, but you are—some times more than others. You have waves—waves of doubt, waves of suspicion, then waves of trust." Diana nodded half unconsciously. "You wonder—but wait. Let me tell you. I am your friend. I am your friend's friend. He of the initial R.G.H."

The listener started at this, but kept her tongue.

"I come to him, before he went away—the last time—and told him I knew he was innocent of the thing many people think him guilty. I was to help him more, but he did not come back. You have not—heard from him since."

The speaker paused slightly, giving the remark the effect of a question, but Diana offered no comment. The voices, and music, and sounds of hilarity outside seemed suddenly faint and far away; and Diana felt that she was isolated in a tiny world of her own, with a little, dominating woman, with piercing black eyes as a companion.

It was strange the power that the Russian soothsayer could exert over her "sitters."

"You are as much in the dark as—as your hair," she went on, her keen eyes still searching Diana's face. "I had a notion you might help. But now—I see you know nothing. Later, you might hinder. Be careful, do not trust your jealousy, nor your impulse. Come to Astra if you are troubled. Do not speak rashly to any friend. Your friends do not feel as—I do."

With a start of pain, Diana realized the truth of this last remark. Most of her acquaintances, she knew, had no compunction in putting the worst construction upon the suspicions against Ralph Harding. Such is human nature that we are willing to believe ill at a moment's notice where we have always known integrity and honour. At last she spoke:

"You seem to know so much," she said, in a voice which did not seem quite like her own, "tell me—do you think Mr. Harding had anything to do with that dreadful thing last Monday. I mean——"

"You mean, not kill the second man, but know something about it? He did, does—but, be sure, whatever he did was all—forced upon him—not of his seeking. Like the first affair, near his office, he was—dragged in, you call it."

"What would drag him in?"

"Through that woman, his client—Mrs. Lensker. She was how the trouble—for him—started."

"Mrs. Lensker! He told me that he had been to see her that day, but before he knew of the murder."

"He not tell you why?" asked Madame quickly.

"Just a matter of business, what else?" Diana's tone betrayed a little anxiety in the question.

"Nothing else, to be sure. But Michael—her husband—might have thought more. He very jealous man, was Lensker."

"But he was dead, then!"

"Of course. But he knew your—that Mr. Harding visit his wife. He was unreasoning man, where his heart concerned. He was suspicious."

Then Diana voiced the dark, persistent thought that had so long been lying like a half-slain serpent in her mind:

"Oh, Madame, had he—any cause for this jealousy?"

"None, but what suffices an unreasoning person. Jealousy finds food where nothing else can. His wife was too young and pretty, that was all."

"Young and pretty!—why should Ralph *let* her drag him into this awful business?"

"Ah, he was gallant. Besides——"

"Besides what, Madame——" Diana spoke breathlessly. "Tell me. You speak of jealousy. You warn me against it. You tell me not to feel it. But why? Has Ralph any feelings towards this woman?"

"He has, but only honourable ones. Like those of a brother towards a sister." The speaker smiled pleasantly, and Diana found considerable reassurance in the expression of it. "I told you he, Lensker, had no cause for jealousy; neither have you. Rest content."

The girl breathed a little sigh.

"I cannot rest very content until I know where Ralph is, and how he is faring," she said. "Oh, Madame, you say you are my friend, tell me, where is he, where is he now?"

Madame Astra laid her hand in gentle fashion upon the other's arm.

"If you must know," she said, "have a big heart. Your lover is with those who murdered Michael Lensker!"

Chapter XVI *Jealousy*

WHEN Diana Allison left the tent in which she had seen Madame Astra, Phyllis Martel's eager young face showed its disappointment.

The gay and light-hearted young hostess was quick to see that her experiment with her girl friend was not so successful as she had hoped.

Diana's expression was one of chagrin and doubt rather than of relief and comfort. She was not the same person who had entered the gaily coloured structure but a short time ago.

Phyllis realized that she had made a mistake. The words of cheer that she expected that the fortune-teller would give her friend had apparently not been forthcoming. She should have let Diana forget her troubles in the ordinary way, instead of trying to palliate them by these artificial means.

" Oh, I'm so sorry, my dear," she burst forth impulsively, before Diana could speak. " I'm sure that old cat has been saying nasty things to you. And I *told* her——"

" Oh, the old cat, as you now call her, probably meant well," replied Diana, a trifle bitterly. " But she—she was a little upsetting, Phyllis. . . . It's getting a little late now ; I think I'll go home if you don't mind."

Phyllis, full of commiseration for her friend, exclaimed compassionately :

" And after you were beginning to enjoy yourself so well, too ! Di, wait till you see the new stunt I'm bringing on as soon as the tennis courts are free—a game played with air-balloons for balls, and ladies' fans for rackets. It'll be great fun ! "

" No, Phyl. I'm sorry, I must go. Besides, I told father I would be home early. Don't you worry, though. Madame Astra was wonderful."

"Was she? I always thought her so. But I did hope she might—might have made you look more cheerful after seeing her."

The two girls were leaving the fernery through which they had come on their way to the fortune-telling tent, when Diana, still with a troubled look in her eyes, gave the other's waist a sudden squeeze.

"Thank you for your intentions, Phyl," she said softly. "I—I wouldn't have stayed longer in any case, really. There are the two boys still waiting for us. Perhaps Cyril will see me home. You could spare him for twenty minutes or so, I suppose?"

Cyril Clarke seemed only too delighted with his opportunity of further escorting Diana, though Hal Roach and Phyllis herself did not seem quite pleased about the business.

On the way home in the taxi, which the young man had ordered, neither spoke for awhile.

Diana was lost in her own thoughts. Her companion occupied himself in silently admiring her profile.

At length the girl, rousing herself with a quaint shake of her shoulders, said:

"Thank you, Cyril."

"Er—what for?" drawled the young man.

"Why, that's almost spoilt it," replied Diana, with an attempt at a smile. "But thank you, Cyril, for not mentioning anything about—you know what. All the others did, in some way or another. I'd much sooner not talk about it, and somehow you seemed to know."

Clarke smiled sapiently.

"I told you our minds were in tune—don't you remember?—at the Fiseleys' dance."

Diana nodded quite gravely at the suggestion.

"I also told you something else," he went on. "But perhaps this is not the time to refer to that."

"No, Cyril, it isn't," said Diana slowly. "But I just want you to know that I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Diana, if there is anything I can do——"

"I don't think there is, Cyril. But I am just beginning to feel annoyed over little things that happened at Phyllis's. Hal Roach looked at you once as if you were a criminal."

"Did he? Poor Hal! He wasn't far from being one himself, anyhow, not long ago. Perhaps he was thinking of some one whom he would have liked to exchange places with me. But never mind about that."

"But I do. Cyril, I feel now as if I would like to have a little talk about things. I'm all—all unsettled. Here we are at home now; won't you come in for a little while?"

Cyril Clarke was a better tactician than most people gave him credit for being. But then most of us, with big interests at stake, can adapt ourselves to some extent when the necessity arises. And to young Clarke, Diana was an exceedingly big interest. He wanted her very much.

He hesitated with a splendid show of reluctance.

" Thank you, Diana, but I had better not come in," he said. " I might only cause you pain if I did have that talk."

The taxi stopped in the drive opposite the Allison mansion, and Clarke stepped out on to the gravel to assist the girl to alight.

Diana caught lightly at his wrist as she stepped to the ground, and led him a few paces towards the house.

" Don't desert me now, Cyril," she said in an uneven voice. " It is not often I need a confidant. But I feel I would like one now. I—I must have some one to talk to."

" As you wish, Diana," said Clarke simply. " I shall tell the driver not to wait."

Seated in the little room where she had last seen Ralph Harding on the night after the tragic events at Lombardy Chambers, Diana could contain herself no longer.

" Oh, that horrible woman ! " she burst out. " I can't get out of my mind something she said."

" What horrible woman ? " asked Clarke, nonplussed. " You surely don't mean Phyllis Martel ? "

"No, not Phyllis, though she was a stupid thing to have brought the woman there. I mean that fortune-teller person in the tent. Didn't you hear of her?"

Clarke confessed that he vaguely understood there was to be some surprise of the sort for the ladies.

"Well, just before I left, Phyllis dragged me along to see the woman. She had her hidden behind the fernery. While I was with her what she said did not seem so bad. But since I have left I have been thinking all sorts of horrible things. Cyril, she—she spoke about Ralph."

"That was most disturbing, no doubt. She—and Phyllis—ought to have had more sense. But don't take too much notice, my dear Diana. These women just make things up."

"Oh, she didn't seem just an ordinary person like that, Cyril. Madame Astra seemed to *know*——"

"Who?" asked Clarke quickly.

"Madame Astra—the fortune-telling woman. She certainly——"

"So it was Madame Astra whom Phyllis had in the tent?"

"Yes. That is what she calls herself."

"Why, that is the woman who identified the man Ralph is supposed to have—I mean, it was she who first told the police who Michael Lensker was. No wonder you felt it badly when you learned who she was!"

"That part of it never struck me, Cyril. It was what she said to me at times; though she declared she was trying to help both me and Ralph."

"Would it help you to tell me what it was that so upset you?"

Diana shook her head.

"I feel I must tell you; for if what she said is true, I don't know what I'll do. I feel there is a lot I don't know. Even Ralph hinted at that. I want to know all, or—or I'll go mad! What was this Lensker woman to Ralph?"

If Clarke read the signs aright, Diana was on the verge of a violent emotional outburst such as only a lover, who has for the first time known jealousy in its nakedest, most virulent form, can show. That he should in a sense be the vicarious recipient, rather suited his book.

"I could not say," he replied slowly. "What did Madame Astra say on that subject?"

"She said that—that whatever Ralph had done he had done it for this woman. She did not actually say that Ralph *was* guilty of what he is suspected; but *if* he did it, it was through Mrs. Lensker. Cyril, I couldn't have believed that Ralph had done anything wrong until—until she said that. Another woman! Fancy him getting into all that trouble for another woman!"

"She was his client, wasn't she?" submitted Clarke. His voice sounded unconvincing. He was not devoid of subtlety.

"His client! Yes, he told me that. But he didn't tell me he loved her, though it is in just a brotherly way, as Madame says!"

"Did Madame Astra tell you that?"

"Yes, she said that Ralph's love for Mrs. Lensker was 'an honourable one, as a brother for a sister.' Oh, it's terrible!"

"That *was* a strange thing to say, I admit," said the young man. "An only child would not know much about brotherly or sisterly affection. But perhaps Harding tried to make up for his family deficiencies by adopting a sister."

"So he chose a young and pretty one, with a jealous husband," Diana burst forth bitterly. She was giving evidence of one of those "waves" of emotion of which the woman she had lately left had warned her. "Oh, if I only *knew*! This half-knowledge of things is hell. I'd sooner know the worst of things at once, and try to get used to it."

The lightning from her eyes betrayed the storm that was in her mind.

Clarke, with well-studied hesitation, spoke.

"I think you are wise, Diana," he said, "and though it goes against my grain really, I will speak. Perhaps, after all, it would be better for you, and that is what I want. . . . Love, you know, is blind."

"What do you mean, Cyril?"

"I mean that your love for Harding was blind—too blind. You were blind to his deceit, my dear girl. I—I never approved of your liking him. Diana, that night that Lensker was murdered—you remember when you rang him up? Harding was alone in his office with that man's wife."

In spite of her desire to hear all, Diana put her hand to her face and gave a little scream. Dully she heard her companion continuing:

"*That* was why he would not see you—or the others."

Though some of the current rumours and beliefs as regards what had transpired in Harding's office on the night of the murder had reached Diana's ears, she had naturally never entertained them; but to hear this statement so definitely made came as an icy shock to her. She shuddered; yet she could not but believe that Cyril Clarke meant what he said.

Yet in the midst of her sharp emotions came a sudden memory—that of Ralph Harding, in that very room where they now sat. His anxious face came before her, and his words "Diana, dear—I might want to rely upon your trust pretty considerably, shortly."

His trust! She *had* trusted him; but—had she, as Cyril suggested, been too blind? She must be sure.

With a swift movement she uncovered her face, and looked her companion full in the eyes with a clear, unflinching gaze.

"How do you know this, Cyril?" she asked, in a voice that was a little too steady.

"I know quite a lot in this case, though I haven't talked about it," replied the young man, complacently. "Quite as much as that mysterious fortune-teller of yours who is naturally so interested in the fate of her countryman—an old lover of hers, I understand he was. For instance, I know that the police have found that Harding is being blackmailed for money over his part in the Lensker affair. By Burrowes, the janitor of Lombardy Chambers, of all persons. They have intercepted a letter meant for Harding, and they traced it to Burrowes this morning."

But that aspect of the case, damning though it seemed, was not so important to Diana.

"*How* do you know, Cyril, that this—this Lensker woman was alone with Ralph that night?"

"Because," said Cyril Clarke, "I am to be a Crown witness in this case. For your sake, I never breathed a word of this before. Lensker was—well, not exactly a friend, but an acquaintance of mine. We have had some business transactions together. He dined with me in town the night he died. He then told me—he was in an emotional mood—of his jealousy towards his wife, and of his suspicions of her and Harding. He said that he knew his wife was going to visit Harding, and he wanted to have it out with him that night.

"I tried to laugh at Lensker's suspicions; I didn't think he was that bad. I felt sure that Harding was coming to the Fiseleys' place, along with the rest of us, that evening.

"I rang up Harding's flat, just to make certain of this, and to reassure Lensker on the point.

"I learned, however, that Harding was not going to the Fiseleys—but 'working back.' This news nearly sent Lensker crazy. Though I tried to persuade him to stay with me, he would not. He had come down to town to settle the matter, and could not rest or delay till he had done so.

"So off he went. Even then I did not take it very seriously; yet you remember how it was at the dance.

"But poor Lensker was right. You know what happened.

"Of course, Diana, I had to tell the police about it, and now——"

Diana's face was ashen grey, and the look in her eyes had become hard and fixed.

" Do not tell me any more," she said, in the ghost of a voice. " Please go."

As the young man, with a slightly less jaunty air than usual, made his way down the drive, he heard a sound from the room he had just left. But whether it was a sob, or a dry, mirthless laugh he did not know.

Chapter XVII *The Janitor's Tenner*

DETECTIVE BUXTON had traced the sender of the letter obtained at Ralph Harding's apartments by a very simple expedient.

He had a good memory for handwriting, and he fancied that he had seen a style very similar to that in which the demand for money was expressed, and that not very long ago.

So he looked up the documents in connection with the Lombardy Chambers tragedy, and discovered the " statement " written by the janitor of the building was set down in writing which he felt sure was identical.

At twelve o'clock precisely he set off to interview Burrowes at the scene of his work. The janitor, it seemed, only worked in the early mornings and the nights, with several hours off in the middle of the day; but this being Saturday, Burrowes worked, as usual, for the afternoon, taking the evening hours off.

When the detective entered the building, Burrowes was leaning against the door of his little room near the stairway, watching the last of the tenants leave the building.

He did not look happy, and he greeted Buxton with a curt nod, as if he scarcely recognized who his visitor was. The latter mentally decided that the janitor was at the tail end of a "recovery." He handed Burrowes his card, lest his memory, in its present clouded state, should need refreshing.

"Anything to report?" the detective commented.

Burrowes shook his head.

"No. Nothing doing . . . except work. I've got an afternoon full of that."

"Mr. Harding hasn't turned up here, I suppose, in the last few days?"

"No. Haven't seen him."

"Hasn't anteed up that cash yet, I suppose?"

"N—— What are you gettin' at?"

The dusty caretaker looked startled. The detective pursued his direct methods.

"You know what I mean all right. I have called about this letter which you wrote him. You have got to come through about it."

" I—I don't know anything about it."

" Of course you don't. But you'll remember something in a minute, or else it will be the worse for you."

Burrowes preserved an awkward silence for a few moments. The detective studied his expression intently.

" Your only hope, Burrowes," he persisted, " is to make a clean breast of everything. Blackmail is a nasty thing, even though your victim is a murderer. That won't make it any the easier for you. You wrote this letter all right, and you know we know it. We also know you have received some money from an outside source within the last few days. Did Harding give you that ? "

" Yes," admitted the janitor at last, reluctantly. His dull brain had given up its feeble struggle against the detective's.

" How much did he give you ? "

" A tenner."

" And when ? "

" The morning that the bloke was found dead here."

" The *morning* ? Why, Harding was not in the city at that time. He is reported to have arrived at Dalesbrook by the train that gets there at midday."

"Oh, it came in a letter."

"I see. You received the—er—bribe by the morning's mail, eh?"

"Yes, that's it."

"And what was the tenner exactly for? What have you kept your mouth shut about?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! You mean to say you got ten pounds for not keeping anything dark?"

"That's right. I kept nothing dark, except about getting the money. And I might have forgot to mention that Mr. Harding was working back that night."

"Well, of course, that might have been a very important item to keep dark, only naturally we found out very soon that Harding was here. But otherwise this statement which you made and signed at the Detective Office is true in every particular?"

Buxton pointed to the written sheet from which he had traced the origin of the letter, and which he had brought along with him to the Chambers.

Burrowes nodded emphatically.

"S'elp me," he declared, "everything in that is true."

"You left here at about 9 p.m. on the night of 22nd October, and you saw and heard nothing unusual up till that time?"

"That's right."

"You knew that Mr. Harding was working back?"

"Yes, I knew that because I saw him go in, and he never came out again. Nobody else was in the building as far as I know."

"And there were no suspicious sounds?"

"Not a whisper."

"Could anybody have got in the doorway you went out of, without a key?"

"Yes. All they'd have to do would be to push it. I generally leave it just ajar with the light on in the passage, when anybody is using their offices."

"Have you any idea why Harding should send you that tenner?"

"Only to say nothing about him, I suppose. He might have *thought* I knew more than I did, perhaps."

"Hm! Did you expect him to get that letter you sent him?"

"Well, I hoped he might. I reckoned he might have left some word at where he lives about sending on letters and things to him."

The detective smiled a little grimly.

"Such a proceeding in a case like this," he murmured, "might be classed as highly irregular."

"Nothing like trying, anyway," smirked the janitor, who was rapidly gaining confidence.

"What made you hopeful of getting a further lot?"

"There was a letter with the tenner promising me some more if I kept my mouth shut."

"Oh yes, of course. Did you keep that letter?"

"No, I think I tore it up."

"Hm! What about the envelope—did you tear that up too?"

"Crikes, no, I mightn't have. I remember keeping the tenner—at least it was two fivers—in it for a couple of days, because I haven't got a purse or wallet, and I thought they might get lost, loose."

"Have a look for it. By the way, how are you so sure this money came from Mr. Harding?"

"Well, who else could it have come from?"

"That's right," mused the detective. "Who else?"

Whilst Burrowes was fumbling amongst his "things," Buxton casually asked:

"By the way, have you heard from Mackay lately?"

A blank look crept over the janitor's face, as he paused in his search.

"Mackay? Mackay? That's up in Queensland, ain't it? No, I don't know anyone up there."

"Not the place—the chap, I mean. Feller called Mackay. Thought you knew him."

The wondering look increased. The detective, who was no mean judge of character, was impressed by its genuineness.

" Don't know him ; don't get you," replied Burrowes, with a puzzled air.

And Buxton could not but admit that he had drawn a blank there. He selected a big cheroot from his cigar case.

Synchronously with the striking of the match came a faint " Ah ! " from the janitor, who had resumed his search.

Shaking out the flaming vesta, without lighting his weed, the detective eagerly took the soiled envelope which was being held out towards him between dirty fingers.

" That's it," said Burrowes.

Intently, Buxton bent his head and examined the bit of stationery, comparing it with another envelope which he had produced from an inside vest pocket.

The address on the first envelope read :

— BURROWES, Esq.,
Caretaker,
Lombardy Chambers,
Queen Street,
Melbourne.

The second had but one word, and a blot. But the type of paper was the same, and it was obvious, from the sigh of satisfaction which escaped the detective, that their source had also been the same.

" Thank you, Burrowes," said Buxton genially at last ; " your finding this little bit of paper might have saved a lot of trouble. At last we seem to be making some definite steps. One thing is certain, Burrowes : you need not expect any more tenners from Harding, for he did not send you the first one. And I would not be too optimistic about receiving any from the original source either, for that appears to be friend Mackay, whom I mentioned to you a few minutes ago ; and Mackay, as you might have read, is dead ! "

" Struth ! " was all the puzzled janitor could say.

Chapter XVIII *Deductions*

THE second inquest following on the Lombardy Chambers tragedy was to be held at Dalesbrook upon the Monday after Buxton's interrogation of the janitor, Burrowes.

The detective had left the latter with a few strict injunctions as to his future conduct.

His colleague, Hammond, was away at the time, investigating a report from a country centre, and he had no opportunity of discussing the latest development with him until the two met on the early morning train which was taking them to Dalesbrook.

Hammond's mission had been unsuccessful, and so far no trace of the man for whom a warrant was issued had been obtained.

As the two seated themselves in a first-class smoking compartment at the rear end of the train, Buxton placed a cheroot in his mouth, while his companion contented himself by sucking at the end of a gold-tipped cigarette holder.

"I see this early morning paper hits us up a bit," remarked the former, tapping an open news-sheet upon his knee.

Hammond nodded shortly.

"They ought to have a shot at catching the blighter themselves," he growled, "instead of continually talking about 'no fresh developments,' and 'continued elusion of police.'"

The junior man had not become so philosophical in the course of his experiences as the other.

Buxton smiled.

"There has been a fresh development," he said pleasantly, "which rather affects some of our views. But of course this estimable rag knows nothing about it yet. I do not refer to the blackmailing letter intended for Harding, a reference to which leaked into the Saturday evening's papers, but to my investigations leading from it."

"Tell me about them," requested Hammond.

Buxton related details of his interview with Burrowes, and of the discovery relating to the two envelopes.

"So our theory that Mackay and the janitor might have been pals working in collusion falls to the ground," he concluded.

"That was Malfy's suggestion," put in Hammond quickly. "I never thought so."

"Not entirely. But we did think that Mackay might have been blackmailing Harding on the strength of information received from Burrowes. We can rule that out definitely. There seems to have been some miscalculation about Burrowes."

"*I* never thought he was much of a factor in the affair."

"I don't mean that you have miscalculated his importance, Hammie—I mean that the somebody who sent him the bribe has. Burrowes has nothing to tell about what took place in the Chambers during the night, yet whoever sent him that money thought so. That's where the miscalculation came in. They promised to send him more money in a few days, but did not do so. Perhaps in the meantime they discovered that Burrowes had been paid for nothing—in other words, they found out their error."

"I see your idea. But if, as you suggest, Mackay sent the money, seeing he was killed a week ago, how could he have sent him any more ? ”

Buxton laughed amusedly.

“ You’ve got me there, Hammie. However, I am certain that that first instalment was paid in error, as it were. Can you see a reason why the second was not paid ? ”

“ No. Only what I’ve just suggested. That the payer was dead.”

“ I can suggest a better one—if possible,” smiled Buxton. “ For it seems to me that Mackay—though the active instrument in the first case—was not the sort of person who could produce unlimited tenners on demand. Judging by our examination of him, that is.”

“ Yes. But what is your better reason ? ”

“ This. The newspapers on the Thursday night of the Lensker murder all stated that Burrowes left the Lombardy Chambers at nine o’clock. I myself have proved that he reached his home by 9.30. Both his wife and neighbours support that. Well, the briber—shall we say ?—read this fact about the janitor’s departure. He then ceased to worry about the janitor as a witness against him because——”

“ Because why ? ”

“ Whatever took place that was vital to his interests occurred *after* nine o’clock.”

Hammond frowned thoughtfully.

"That may be so," he conceded, "but I don't see that that affects us much. It only means that whatever transpired took place when Harding was alone in the building."

"But Harding must have known that. He was aware of the janitor's hours, so why should he try to bribe somebody that wasn't there? That's the point. The money definitely did not come from him direct. Did it come from him at all? It came from or by Mackay. But if we can establish a working connection between Harding and Mackay, there might be something in it. Yet even then I don't see why Harding, a man of intelligence, should think it necessary to take such action."

"Don't forget that cheque for £20 on Harding's bank that was cashed by an unknown bearer on Saturday morning. That looks suspicious."

"That was after the bribe had been given of course. He would naturally want money in any case."

"To bribe Mackay with, perhaps. We have established a connection between Harding and Mackay, and to my mind the case is all the blacker against our man. Mackay knew too much—we don't know how, yet—and he wanted too much. So Harding killed him. Why worry with these confusing details which lead us nowhere?"

"I am not so sure that they do lead us nowhere," retorted Buxton, with a slight loss of his pleasant manner. "Anyhow, I have an idea, which I am going to follow out."

Hammond displayed a suddenly respectful interest.

"It is this," the senior detective went on. "I am going to get out of this train at Nullabong flat. I don't think our investigations there have been sufficiently—conclusive. You know, I gave up further search there when I found Mackay's hat, the morning after we interviewed Haynes, you remember. I thought that that would be the last of the exhibits in the case; but it should not have been, perhaps.

"You, Hammie, can give all the evidence required at the inquest. You know all the details of the case that will be wanted. I shall give you a note to the coroner, apologizing for my absence, and explaining that it is necessary."

Hammond nodded. "I see. I shall just proceed as usual."

"Yes. And after the inquest, send Malfy along to join me at the Nullabong Flat Post Office. I suppose it will be sunset by the time he gets there. You, I take it, are going to Ballarat immediately the case is concluded, to make inquiries about a suspect there?"

"Yes, that was the intention."

" Well, carry on in that direction, and I shall carry on in mine."

" What exactly is your idea in getting out at Nullabong Flat ? " asked Hammond, after a few minutes' pause.

" Just this," replied his colleague. " Friend Harding, who is vitally wanted by us in any case, has not been found in any other part of Victoria in spite of the police drag-nets, as the papers call it. Perhaps that is because he is not in any other part of Victoria. In other words, he may be still somewhere about that goldfield. I propose to make sure, one way or another."

" By the way," he continued, " of course you understand not to let any inkling of my intentions get out. It would do no harm if my name were published in the papers as appearing at the inquest."

Hammond assured his senior of his understanding, and the remainder of the journey was passed in comparative silence.

Buxton's last words, on stepping on to the platform at Nullabong Flat, were :

" Oh, Hammie—as soon as you reach Dalesbrook, ring up Headquarters and see if those prints of Mackay's fingers are finished yet. If they are, get them to dispatch a copy at once to me, care of the Nullabong Flat Post Office. If they do that I should get them this evening."

"Right-ho," said Hammond simply.

Buxton, with big firm strides, turned and left the platform, and made his way out on to the dusty road which led to the township.

Chapter XIX The Hidden Dynamo

WAITING at the station gate was a four-wheeled trap used by the storekeeper at Nullabong Flat township for the carriage of goods from the station, and also subsidized by the Postmaster-General's Department for the conveyance of mails over the same distance. It was unattended at present. The tall, rather bony horse between the shafts seemed quite content to pick away at the scanty grass by the roadside indefinitely.

Buxton simply seated himself on the box seat—the back of the cart was open and contained nothing but an empty case and a sack or two—and waited for the driver to return. The latter was apparently the young man he had seen arguing with the caretaker on the platform as the train drew out.

The detective was the only passenger who had alighted at Nullabong Flat.

Presently a freckly-faced youth of about nineteen appeared, glancing up at Buxton as if he were a matter of course, and prepared to get up alongside him.

"Going out to the Flat?" he inquired casually, as he took up the reins.

The detective merely nodded, and not another word was said until the journey was nearly completed.

To chew a long stem of grass was to the youthful driver quite a satisfactory substitute for conversation. His was the true phlegmaticism of the bush.

Buxton had no desire to disturb him in this. He too was chewing, as it were, but mentally.

It would be a great stroke for him if he could produce Harding within a few hours of the time that the verdict of the inquest would be announced. The newspapers—not that they worried him much, however—would have little on him then.

He felt sure that he knew what the verdict would be. Guilty, against Ralph Harding. That, in a sense, was the newspapers' verdict.

Everybody thought that Harding was the cause of this second murder, and that he at least "knew something" about the first. That had actually been his own favoured view until very recently. But now—as he had indicated to his colleague—he had some doubts.

Besides the internal evidence of Burrowes, there was the report to him of Senior Constable Tate, who had witnessed part of the attack on Harding near his residence the night after the murder. Buxton had come across this again on going through the papers of the case before making this journey, and the report now seemed to have a new significance.

At first it was held that this midnight episode was but as it appeared to be on the surface—an attack by robbers. Harding himself had given no clue that it was anything else ; and operations by such marauders had been fairly prevalent during the last few months.

Now it looked to Buxton as if there might be gang work behind all the series of events which had so disturbed his Department of late. There were other factors which they had not suspected. But whether Harding had operated with or against the gang there was little to show.

There was a chance that Harding was another victim. He, too, might be dead. But he must be found if humanly possible, dead or alive.

In a way, he was causing himself a lot of trouble, indulging in what Hammond called " side theories " when there was practically a certain conviction against Harding. But it was never Buxton's way to take the easier road favoured by some detectives. He was conscientious in all he did, and self-satisfaction with him came first.

It would be highly satisfying, in a way, if he did prove that Harding was not the guilty party, and brought the real perpetrators to book.

Then the Department—and he in particular—would have something on the newspapers. And that was something which they had not had for a long time.

The driver, who had no idea who his passenger was, pulled up at the little wooden Post Office, and Buxton dismounted. The detective did not then proclaim his presence to the postmaster, but, after handing a few shillings to the young man—who conscientiously returned one and sixpence—set off for the disused diggings on foot.

It was a warm day, and before he had covered the half-mile he was surrounded by an aura of flies.

Buxton met with no passers-by, for which he was just as pleased.

His first thought was to make a complete circuit of the workings, to see if any places of concealment suggested themselves at a casual glance.

Upon his previous visits the detective had satisfied himself that neither of the two old shafts, nor the tailing heaps about them near which Mackay's body had been found, offered any hiding-place where a man might reasonably hope to live for days on end without being seen.

Both shafts offered no means of descent without special appliances. The old wooden ladders with which they had once been furnished had long since crumbled into decay ; and the timbering of the walls—so far as could be seen from the surface—was very meagre, and gave no foothold.

However, if nothing eventuated from his first inspection, Buxton decided that he would get special appliances, and search the interior of some of the shafts. That was where Malfy would help.

This examination of the place was to be a thorough and searching one, if it took days.

A passing thought had struck him right at the very first that there might be something interesting at the bottom of one of these claims.

However, the big detective was not indulging in any speculative theorizing now, as he slowly moved around the edge of the workings. He merely concentrated on one thing—looking for objects of interest. His mind, as he himself would have put it, was in a state of " observant blank."

Nothing worthy of closer inspection struck him around the lower end of the flat. The claims here were shallower, and the mullock heaps less high.

At the far side of the flat, Nullabong Creek looked cool and refreshing. It was a clear running stream about fifteen yards wide, and before he had gone very far along its banks the sight of it made Peter Buxton feel thirsty.

The day was distinctly warm, and his exertions so far, though not strenuous, had taken a little out of him.

Sighting a clear shady spot at the head of a short cascade, the detective decided he would here rest himself for a few minutes, and slake his thirst.

After his drink, seated upon a heavy piece of timbering which had apparently once done duty in connection with some of the mining operations, Buxton for once denied himself his usual cheroot, but pulled from his pocket a gaudily wrapped cake of chocolate.

The drone of the cascade struck a strange note upon his ears as he idly removed the paper from the sweetmeat.

Near his feet the water swirled in a tiny eddy. With a careless movement he flung a piece of paper on to the stream, and casually he watched it. It twirled for a second or two, and then was suddenly sucked from sight.

Once or twice more this performance was repeated. The detective found himself taking a boyish delight in letting bits of the wrapper fall upon the water, and watching them disappear.

" About time some of it bobbed up somewhere else," he mused. He felt a silly disappointment when it did not, and threw the rest of the paper in.

That, too, darted from sight. The incessant hum of the waters seemed to mock at his futile occupation.

With a boyish laugh, he got to his feet, stretching his arms out lazily. Something down the stream, forty yards away, attracted his attention. Surely it was a piece of that elusive wrapping-paper !

Yes, there was another piece. And then another bit shot suddenly into view, as if it had come out from somewhere under the bank, and not over the cascade at all.

" That is funny," the big man murmured, still amused at himself. " This will bear looking into."

And he hastened towards the spot where the little bright objects were rapidly coming into sight.

Before he had gone half-way, however, he stopped, a look of intense listening upon his face. The strange drone which had been playing upon his ear-drums for some time suddenly seemed to separate itself from the rest of the watery sounds, and appeared to be coming from directly under his feet.

He stamped hard, with his big right boot.

The gravelly earth beneath shook noticeably, with an unmistakable " hollow " sound.

" This *will* bear looking into ! " he told himself emphatically.

On his hands and knees, Detective Buxton examined the place.

Presently a cry of satisfaction escaped his lips, and he began scratching aside the loose ground with his clawed hands, like a dog. Within two or three minutes, a big square tray of timber lay exposed a few inches below the surface.

Inserting his fingers in a couple of chinks, with some difficulty the detective lifted the section of wood from its place. Below lay exposed a miniature rushing torrent !

The humming sound which had first attracted his notice was now increased twentyfold, and a moment's observation made it obvious what was the cause of this. Directly beneath Buxton's feet, in a small pit made for the purpose, was fixed a water-dynamo. It appeared to be in full operation.

A heavily insulated metal cable led away from the motor housing into the earth on the landward side of the pit. Apparently its destination also was secret.

Peter Buxton contemplated his discovery with a puzzled air.

" A hidden race, and a hidden dynamo," he mused. "Why? And both wonderfully well concealed, too. Now, where do the wires lead to?"

Of course, it was quite possible that this secret installation had nothing whatever to do with the case in hand. Yet the witness Haynes had told him most emphatically that there was no work at all being done amongst the old claims. This power-plant proved that some sort of operations were being proceeded with not far away, which the operators desired no one should know anything about. He must try to find the other end of that underground cable.

There was only one place it could reasonably lead to, and that was into one of the old mines. There was not a hut, shed or building of any kind on the flat.

Replacing the cover, and leaving as few signs as possible that it had been disturbed, Buxton lit a cheroot and proceeded to look for traces of where a channel for the cable might have been dug.

Evidently it had been laid for some time, for, beyond a slight depression in the ground near the water-race, he found none.

The nearest claim to where he stood was perhaps the most pretentious on the flat. It was, indeed, not far away from the scene of the murder, and Buxton examined the place with active interest.

Most of what were once substantial poppetheads still remained, but the old brace was rotted and broken. A high tailing heap ran in the direction of the spot where Mackay's body had been found.

Cautiously looking down the shaft, the detective could see nothing but blackness. It was by far the deepest pit he had seen. Here, too, there appeared to be no ready means of descent. Most of the rungs had fallen from the ladder which had been affixed to the wall of the shaft as a means of ingress and egress when the old cage was not working ; and of course the wire cable which had once swung from the big pulley overhead had long since been removed.

He turned his head sideways, listening intently with his broad hand to his ear. No sound came to him, except the distant murmur of the waters.

Just as Buxton was about to withdraw himself, something caught his eye in a far and gloomy corner of the shaft.

He was not sure, but it seemed as if a cable hung there—pressed closely into the timbering so as to avoid a casual glance.

Bright sunlight was flaming overhead ; and in the peculiar light caused by the intermixture of darkness and brilliance, Buxton could not pick out objects within the shaft clearly.

Then he had a brain wave.

If there were anything moving on the flat, it would probably be only after nightfall.

On the one hand, whatever mysterious operations the power-plant portended, light for them would be required down below. At present illuminations beneath were not visible; but after nightfall a bright electric light in the passages below should readily be distinguished from the shaft head. That would render his search easy on that score and definitely establish one way or the other whether the mine was in use for some purpose.

On the other hand—pursuing his original theory—Ralph Harding, if he came out at all, would wait till after dark. He was certainly not above ground. Circumstances argued that if he were alive and in that vicinity, he had an accomplice. No man can exist for over a week without food of any sort. Buxton was now quite sure that there was at least one secret to be revealed in connection with the Mackay murder, and that not very far away from here.

He had the feeling that he was on the verge of great things. The time he had taken from attending the inquest had certainly not been wasted.

He decided that he would go back to the Post Office, and not return to the old workings till dusk.

In the meantime, he had several arrangements to make, not unconnected with rope ladders and electric torches.

Before he reached the township, he had decided in his mind who Harding's accomplice might very well be. He proposed that he would fill in part of that afternoon making sure.

He had both the time and, he believed, the opportunity.

Chapter XX *An Arrest*

NIGHT was down over the deserted workings of Nullabong Flat.

Dusk had brought a wind out of the West, and, with it, clouds. Save for a dull gleam which haunted the track of the departed sunset, not a rift of light glimmered from the heavens.

Strange, grotesque shadows lurked amongst the tailing heaps; while here and there the stark timbers of old poppet-heads made sinister shapes against the dull sky.

Their scarred and splintered forms stretched forth, as if appealing to the ghosts of long dead and forgotten miners to come back and people them, to save them from their loneliness.

The flat was not a pleasant place to be on when the wind whined and moaned around the old workings on a cheerless night.

So thought Detective Buxton, as, with a borrowed coat well buttoned up around his throat, he picked his way carefully towards the scene of his morning's discovery.

He was alone. Although Malfy had had instructions to drive over and join him—which instructions he had confirmed that afternoon by telephone—he had so far not arrived. Apparently his hired car had broken down somewhere over the eleven miles which separated Dalesbrook from the Nullabong Flat township.

As soon as it was properly dark, Buxton had decided not to wait any longer. He left a note for the constable with the Postmaster—whom he had pressed into his service—notifying his intentions, and giving Malfy instructions, should he arrive before ten o'clock, to proceed to the workings, and wait in readiness by the roadside. Buxton was armed with a police whistle, and possibly he might want to use it.

But what gave him more comfort as he dodged quietly past a heap of debris, and approached the deep mine near to the creek, was the thought that he was armed with a very serviceable revolver as well. In his hand he held a powerful pocket torch, but only once did he use it. It was when a deeper blackness appeared before him, and he found himself treading on the very edge of an unprotected shaft.

How far down it went he did not know, but he knew it would be too deep to clamber out of.

As he rounded the end of the big tailing heap, a cold gust of air blew into his face ; and at the same time his hat was lifted from his head and carried backwards.

As if in appreciation of this jest of the wind, somewhere in the darkness a night bird screeched shrilly in weird glee.

Peter Buxton was by no means subject to nerves, as his record with the Department had always showed ; but he began to wish he had not come alone upon this expedition. After all, Malfy might have only kept him waiting another ten minutes.

Just to demonstrate to his own satisfaction that he was completely master of himself, the detective turned to grope his way back after his missing head-gear ; then instinctively he flattened himself against the pile of rocks. He had heard the rattling sound of footsteps behind him.

Scarcely breathing, Buxton stood there. It was almost as if he were part of the rocks themselves.

Whoever was approaching was apparently quite careless as to the noise he made.

Suddenly a dark form clattered past. To the detective, standing motionless there, it seemed vaguely familiar, in spite of the gloom. This familiarity may have been due to the watcher's previously conceived suspicion, but as he crept forward after the retreating man, he felt quite a thrill of exultation.

He dared not draw too close, and presently the figure in front was lost to sight in the gloom of the tailing dumps.

Apparently he was heading straight for the shaft which had so awakened Buxton's interest that morning.

How he was to descend it—if that were his intention—was a mystery, unless the new-comer carried a rope-ladder, or something of that sort with him. Buxton had searched in vain for a more permanent means that morning.

It was a problem that the detective was not yet to solve.

Before he had made his way half the distance along the gloomy mass of stones, he became aware that the sounds in front had ceased.

He listened intently. Beyond the gusty soughing of some saplings near by, and the intermittent surge of the cascade away in the darkness, not a sound was to be heard.

Perhaps the man in front had discovered that he was being followed, and was now waiting in ambush behind some jutting formation of the stones.

Buxton drew his revolver, and waited. For fully five minutes he stood there, every muscle tense. But no sign, no indication came that he was other than alone amongst that tumble of stones and debris.

Once more the weird cry of the night bird rang out, and, in spite of himself, the waiting man started.

Anything was better than continued inaction, so once more he moved forward, this time more cautiously than before.

At last he had passed the whole length of the tailing heap, which had loomed, an overwhelming mass, upon his left, and stood, mystified.

Nothing moved about him. The man he had been stalking might just as well have been swallowed up by the earth.

There was still the shaft of the old mine to examine. Perhaps that might now have something to reveal to him.

Creeping stealthily forward, lest there might be some lurking danger about, Buxton peered through the broken timbers of the brace. He could scarcely suppress a gasp of satisfaction at what he saw.

On the wall of the shaft, at no very great distance below, was framed an oblong shape of light. One of the "drives" was illuminated. Obviously the cable which he had traced supplied the means by which the light was obtained.

Here he was on the track of something really definite!

He felt a burning desire to ascertain at once what was the meaning of these strange goings-on upon the flat; yet caution forbade that he do anything too rash. Even now, with the light shining from below, he could see no way of descending the shaft; but had he done so it would have been madness to have attempted anything of the kind, alone as he was.

Malfy had received instructions to bring a long manilla rope-ladder with him, as light and strong as possible. But Malfy was not here.

Obviously, however, there was some other way of getting into that passage down below; and seemingly the elusive person of a few minutes previously had used it.

The situation was tantalizing.

No good could be done by leaning over the pit-head, and gazing at the square of light indefinitely, so at length Buxton decided to make his way back to the road, and see if Malfy had yet arrived.

As he turned to go, a strange sound smote his ears. It was like a fiendish, high-pitched laugh—hideous, cackling. It seemed to well up from the centre of the earth, and the detective, used as he was to the ghastly things of life, involuntarily shuddered. His blood seemed suddenly to drop in temperature about 50 per cent.

" Good Lord above," he muttered, " what the devil's that ? "

A moment later, with a shrug of his big shoulders at himself, he commenced his gloomy course across the flat in search of the constable. He had to take quite a grip of himself not to take a precipitate run.

Malfy was not there.

Buxton felt strangely loath to re-cross the old workings, and take up his position again in the eerie precincts of the old mine. Still, it had to be done. But first—it was foolish of him, no doubt—he smoked a cigarette behind the protecting bole of a big swamp-gum.

As he once more made his silent way through the grotesque shadows near the end of the big, tailing heap, without the slightest warning a dark form loomed in front of him. Something whizzed past his head, and went crashing loudly amongst the rocks in the rear.

The detective, apprehensive as he was of surprises, was on the alert. The instant beam of his powerful torch revealed, in menacing attitude, a man standing upon a small pile of stones before him. The light shone full upon his face, marking out the features in clear intensity.

He who stood there was the man whom he wanted most, yet somehow least expected to see just then.

" Stand, Ralph Harding," cried Buxton in a voice over which he had full command. "I arrest you on a charge of murdering Donald Mackay!"

Ralph's reply was to fall in a dead faint at the detective's feet.

Chapter XXI *Ralph Harding Comes To*

BUXTON'S first act, after Ralph Harding had dropped to the ground, was to switch off his light and listen.

Being much experienced in the tricks of criminals and others, it struck the detective that there might be a trap in this somewhere for him. The big, active form that he had seen hurrying past earlier in the night was certainly not that of Harding.

The suspected accomplice might be lurking in the shadows somewhere, ready to pounce upon him as he knelt by the prostrate man. The detective was not going to spoil his coup by an undue lack of caution in a moment like this.

Not a sound, however, came to his ears, except those that would still haunt the flat when it was deserted of mankind.

Even the breathing of the man at his feet was inaudible.

With a quick flash of his light, he located his prisoner again. He had not moved. Buxton bent over him, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

Harding was quite limp and unresisting. A moment later his arms were behind his back, and the steel bracelets were around his wrists. Harding was undoubtedly unconscious. There was no questioning the genuineness of his faint.

Buxton's next problem was to get Ralph away from that place. He had no wish to linger unduly, nor to leave his prisoner behind while he went for assistance. He might not be there upon his return.

There was but one thing for it. With a heave, the detective managed to get the sagging form of his captive around his shoulders. Carefully picking his way, he set off towards the road.

Buxton was a powerful man, but he found that journey across the flat at Nullabong one of the most strenuous physical efforts in his career. Ralph Harding was by no means a light weight, and the rough nature of the going, with the pitfalls to be avoided, made the feat doubly difficult.

Bathed in perspiration, and staggering, the detective at last reached the tree where he had smoked his cigarette—some hours previously, as it now seemed. Thankfully he slid his burden to the ground. He sat down for awhile to recover himself, with his back against the big trunk.

This time, however, he did not smoke a cigarette. He did not have the breath just yet.

Here, on the roadside, the blackness of the night was not so deep. A faint, broad ribbon of dust could be seen leading dimly in the direction of Nullabong township.

Buxton wished devoutly that a motor-car would come along from the Melbourne side. He would commandeer it, and thus save himself the hard toil of carrying Harding the rest of the way to custody. His prisoner did not show the slightest signs of reawakening for some time to come. But he was not quite out of the bush yet.

Suddenly the detective heard a faint movement from his right. A dark shadow seemed to rise up from the ground. Then, as if it paused irresolutely, the figure, just discernible against the gloom of the flat behind, stood motionless. Then it moved slowly towards the edge of the road.

There was a click, and Buxton's pocket-torch was on.

" Malfy ! " he cried, " well met ! You have just arrived at a good time."

The constable, slightly staggered at the unexpected glare of the other's lamp, came forward.

"I'm sorry I am late, Mr. Buxton," he commenced apologetically, "but——"

"Never mind about that just now," cut in his senior. "Have a look at this."

The detective showed him the prostrate form of his captive.

Malfy whistled.

"That's him, all right," he exclaimed, after a brief examination of the face exposed in the bright ring of light flashed upon it. "I remember Harding's face perfectly by the photographs."

"Well, let's get him along," said Buxton. "The sooner we are out of this the better. I think he is hurt, and we can save our breath for other matters until we get fixed up at the Post Office."

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Ralph Harding was lying on a rough shake-down of rugs in the room where the body of the man whose inquest that day so greatly concerned him had been first brought after its discovery.

The Postmaster—who lived in a detached cottage at the side of the humble official building—had fussed around with an oil lamp, and provided what facilities he could.

Ralph was still unconscious, and he appeared to be suffering more from exhaustion and starvation than anything else. Buxton was amazed at the pallor of his skin, and the sunkenness of his eyes. His heart was beating steadily, but weakly.

There was a slight swelling over his left temple as if he had been struck there with something hard. Otherwise he was unmarked.

Buxton surveyed his captive with arms akimbo.

" Seems to be well out to it," he remarked. " Have you any whisky or brandy about the place, Pilkington ? "

The little postmaster, who was thus addressed, pulled at the undersized beard which he affected, as if the matter caused him a great mental effort.

" May be some in the house," he answered, non-committally. " I'll ask the missus."

After Pilkington had buzzed away on his mission, Buxton filled in the minutes awaiting his return by giving Malfy a rapid résumé of his activities that night.

" I am sorry I was not with you, sir," replied the constable, when the other had finished. " The car I hired from Williams at Dalesbrook broke down about six miles back. We spent about an hour trying to mend it, and then I walked on. Williams hasn't caught me up yet, so I suppose he is still tinkering with it."

"I brought this along with me," he continued, unwinding a fine manilla rope-ladder, which had been coiled around his waist beneath his coat, "but I don't suppose you need it now. Unless," he suggested, "you think it would be a good idea to get back to the diggings now, and look for this fellow's accomplice."

"I am pretty certain we don't need to go back to there to find *one* of his accomplices," returned Buxton, feeling for his case of smokes. "I can guess where to get him any time. We've got the most important chap. I want to hear what he has to say first. Ah, here's Pilkington."

The postmaster came fussing in with about three fingers of whisky in a medicine bottle. Apparently his wife had thought fit to ration out what was in her stock.

The effect of the spirits was almost immediate; Ralph rolled his head, his eyelids quivered, and his lips seemed to try to form words.

The next minute he was passing a hand over his brow, and staring dazedly at those around him.

"Joan!" he murmured in a far-away tone, "they are after Joan!" and he struggled weakly to get up off the couch.

Not unkindly, the detective placed his hand on the other's shoulder.

"Take your time," he counselled. "Have a little more of this. Pilkington, can you get us some milk? We ought to give him something like that, in his present state."

Presently some show of colour appeared in Ralph's cheeks, and he sat up.

"I—I don't know who you are," he said in a voice that came haltingly at first, "but I tell you, they are after her. They are going to torture her, the devils! Little Joan! Quick!"

He made an unsteady attempt to rise, but once more Buxton's hand came down upon his shoulder.

"Who," he asked quietly, "is Joan?"

"Joan—Joan Lensker. Never mind who she is, they are after her. I—I was going for help and—how did I come here?"

"Calm yourself," said the detective, who could see that the whisky was doing its work better every minute. "Before you say any more I have a right to tell you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. You have evidently forgotten that you are under arrest for the murder of Donald Mackay."

"Under arrest—what—who?" gasped Ralph, a look of complete puzzledom usurping his features. "Donald Mackay? I—I don't understand."

"Perhaps you don't," replied the other grimly, "but you might when your trial comes on."

"*Donald Mackay?* I have never heard of him. And I have never killed anybody."

"The coroner at Dalesbrook thinks you did. He found you guilty of that crime this afternoon at the inquest at Dalesbrook."

"I don't know what to say, or where I am," said Ralph weakly. "But what I know is that I've had a hell of a time. I've been nearly killed." He stared from one to the other of the men in the room. "I see one of you is a policeman. If he is, he is just the man I want. Give me something to eat, I'm starved, and I'll tell you all I know."

"Anything you care to say, I shall listen to," said Buxton. "I am Detective Buxton, in charge of this case, so you know who I am. You should also know, so that you won't—er—make any mistakes with your facts, that Haynes has split on you."

As he uttered these final words, the detective's keen eyes watched the other's face intently. No expression save that of continued bewilderment showed there. Much more surprise showed itself on Malfy's face as Buxton said this; but of course the constable checked himself from making any remark.

"Haynes? I do not know Haynes either. You speak in riddles! I understand, of course, from what you say, that a man is killed, but who he is, or how, I do not know." Then with a gleam of understanding: "You do not mean Michael Lensker?"

"No," replied Buxton slowly. "I do not mean Michael Lensker, though we might have something to say to you about him, afterwards. The man whose death we are concerned with now was called Donald Mackay. There are *two* men dead."

Ralph shook his head, helplessly.

"There might be more deaths yet," he said. "But give me that glass of milk and those biscuits, and let me tell you my story. If I'd only gone to you at first, as I should have done, there might have been less story and more—more advancement. But I thought——

"But I must be quick. As I told you, the devils are after Joan, and we must find her and save her!

"And when we have got—got her into safety, the rest should be easy."

At a nod from Buxton, the little postmaster handed Ralph the refreshments which he had brought. He was immediately dispatched for some more.

"When you are ready," remarked Buxton, folding his arms before him in an attitude of attention, "carry on. You cannot make your yarn too quick for me."

"Why," asked Malfy in an aside to the detective, while Ralph was occupied, glass in hand, in munching his bicuits,—" why did you pick on Haynes, to say that he had split on Harding ? "

" Oh," replied Buxton lightly, " I had to try a hazard at some name, hadn't I ? Besides, Haynes did, in a sense, split on Harding, didn't he ? He was the chief witness against him."

The constable nodded. " Yes," he agreed, " I suppose that is right."

Chapter XXII *Mysterious Doings*

RALPH HARDING'S story of his disappearance was told to the detective and his companions by the flickering light of an oil lamp in the little back room of the Nullabong Flat Post Office, while the midnight wind moaned and whispered outside.

First of all he sketched for them, in a rapidly recovering voice, the events leading up to his first and second journeys to Dalesbrook—the note from his client Mrs. Lensker ; what he saw in the lift ; his thoughts about the matter being a hoax, and then his ghastly realization afterwards ; the nocturnal attack upon himself at Cygnet Street, and the futile ending to both his visits in search of the murdered man's wife. Nor did he omit to mention that strange and hideous sound—like the distorted laugh of a wild man—which three times he had heard, an evil *motif* through the piece. Finally he referred to his meeting with Madame Astra, and the plan they had discussed for establishing his own innocence.

Ralph spoke with entire candour in the matter, and the others listened with scarcely an interjection. Malfy—at Buxton's instigation—made notes from time to time.

" Oh, so Madame Astra has been at you, too, has she ? " commented the detective at this stage. " And it was really she who decided you on—running away ? "

" Yes," replied Ralph, " from what she told me, and the way she put it, made it seem my only chance was to postpone my visit to the Detective Office, where I would probably have been arrested, and to find out what we could on our own account. Madame had theories——"

Buxton nodded, curtly.

" She's no fool, that woman, whatever else she is," he cut in ; " but tell me, *have* you found out anything by your plan ? "

" Well, our plan, as you call it, was not carried out. Yet I have found out quite a lot, but what it means I don't quite know."

And Ralph carried on his narrative from the point where it had been broken off.

On the morning after Madame Astra's mysterious visit to Ralph's apartment, he had received a letter. The slightly incoherent contents had stimulated him to taking immediate and definite steps.

"Dear Ralph (it read),—

"I am in awful trouble, and am held prisoner. I am kept in a house about ten miles out of Dalesbrook, and the people will not let me go. I don't know why, unless it is ransom. Michael went away on business on Wednesday, and I was all alone at home when these people came and just took me. There is only one man and an awful old woman in the place, and I am sure if you came you could get me out easily. The man says he is a doctor, and that I am a patient. I heard him explaining this to a caller yesterday, after I had screamed out.

"I have found this pencil and paper, and am going to try to slip this note with sixpence I have to a boy—a grocer's boy, I think—who passes near my window every afternoon. You are the only one who will believe this, Ralph, the only one who can help me. Now you know why I did not see you Thursday.

"Ralph, do not fail me. The house has green window-blinds, and I can see the top part of some old mines through the cracks, just close by.

"Ralph, find me quickly, and save me!

"JOAN."

The note was unmistakably in the handwriting of Mrs. Lensker, and to Ralph every word of it rang true.

His heart bounded with a sense of action.

It was a matter he could very well investigate for himself, and, until after he had seen Joan and heard what she had to say, it would be as wise—under the circumstances—not to mention things to anyone else. The influence of Madame Astra helped him in this decision.

He immediately consulted a railway guide, and from this, in conjunction with his own slight knowledge of the Dalesbrook district, fixed on Nullabong Flat as the most likely spot for the prison-house of Joan Lensker to be. It was, in fact, the only mining locality between the former place and Melbourne.

The morning train having long since left, and there being no other passenger train until the middle of the afternoon, Ralph was fortunate enough to get accommodation in a goods train which left Spencer Street at about eleven o'clock.

It took him nearly as long to arrive at Nullabong Flat by this means as if he had waited for the passenger service; and it was just after five when he stepped out of the guard's van at the wayside platform.

Having made discreet inquiries about mines from the caretaker at the station, he set off in the direction of the old workings by Nullabong Creek. The caretaker pointed out the way across the paddocks.

The sun was very low as he approached the workings. Though he looked carefully around for any adjacent house with green window-blinds, he could see none.

There were no buildings at all near the claims, though here and there arose old poppet-heads—evidently "the top-part" of the mines referred to in Joan Lensker's letter.

Possibly, however, the house was on the other side of the mined area before him, and, skirting the workings until he came upon the main road, he proceeded to walk down it, in the direction of Melbourne.

In the distance, on the right he could see a house. As he drew near it, he tried to make out green blinds. But the place had no blinds at all. In fact, it was, on closer view, but a two-roomed weather-board shanty, scarcely pretentious enough even for a country doctor to retire to with a patient.

No other house was in sight, so Ralph decided to seek information from the occupant of this place. It was getting late and he wanted to do all he could before dark.

His knock was answered by a man about thirty-five, with a dark and rather unkempt appearance, but not unkindly face.

From him Ralph gathered that a house such as he was in search of was situated on a branch road, a little lower down. There was, however, a short way to reach it through the claims across the flat. The man pointed out the tallest of the poppet-heads in view. If Ralph would only make straight for that, the house he was after would be in sight before he reached it.

Thanking him, Ralph went on his way. But the track was longer than he had been led to believe, for he was compelled to dodge many open shafts, and go around numbers of tailing heaps, which made the short cut very circuitous.

He had gone nearly as far as his landmark. No house was yet in view, and he was well out of sight of the road. Something moved behind a heap of stones; then simultaneously two men stepped out before him.

One stood and pointed a revolver at Ralph, while the other came forward, holding some pieces of rope and a cloth in his hand.

The former was the man who had advised Ralph to come in this direction. Not a word was spoken, but obviously the intention was to bind and gag him.

It was not, however, Ralph's intention to submit tamely, and, as the second man drew near, Ralph suddenly side-stepped, getting him in the line of fire. At the same time, judging the distance nicely, he lunged forward with his closed left fist, giving the other a heavy thump in the chest. The recipient staggered backwards.

Ralph turned, and dodged for the nearest heap of stones. The revolver cracked, but harmlessly.

The next instant it had cracked again, and Ralph felt the bullet whizz by close to his left ear.

He dodged again sharply, his foot trod on a loose piece of stone, and he shot forward, sprawling. Then something steel hard and sharp seemed to split open his skull, and, in a sea of reeling stars, Ralph lost consciousness of this world.

* * * * *

" What sort of a fellow was this second man ? " Buxton asked.

" He was a middle-aged man, slightly below average height, very square shouldered, and he walked with a limp."

The detective looked slightly disappointed, but offered no further comment just then. He looked at his watch, and the movement reminded Ralph of the time he was taking in the relating of his story—time which, he felt, was valuable.

" I must cut this a bit shorter," he said.

* * * * *

When Ralph came to himself he was held prisoner in the mine which had aroused Buxton's suspicions.

By what means he had been brought into the underground passage, he did not know.

He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, whether it was days or hours.

One man, the squat person, with the limp, whom the others referred to as Geordie Cranch, appeared to be his special gaoler. There were two others who from time to time visited him ; but neither of these was the man from the shanty by the road.

He had not to wait long to ascertain, broadly, the reason for the strange action that had been taken against him. He had obviously been lured into a trap. In all likelihood, his letter had been intercepted and read.

Under threats of violence, Ralph was urged to " come through," and to " tell where it was."

On proclaiming his ignorance of what " it " was—the mysterious desideratum of his captors —Ralph was greeted with jeers and finally cruelty. In some way he had been caught more deeply than before in the mysterious net which surrounded the death of Michael Lensker. But these men knew the hidden meaning of it all, and he did not.

Of Joan Lensker he heard but casual reference. But it seemed she, too, was actually being held prisoner—and for the same reason as himself. She also was suspected of concealing or knowing the hiding-place of that which the men who kept him in captivity were so anxious to find.

But what it was they gave no hint.

Before the end Ralph had his suspicions; but then events so shaped themselves that his only concern was a very different one.

His gaolers had reduced him to a weak and unresisting state by stinting his food and water, when—it must have been early in the same evening that Buxton had discovered him, though it seemed an interminable time ago now—two of them came to him. Cranch displayed his revolver, as he usually did after his infrequent absences.

The other, who appeared to be the leader of the gang, issued a drastic ultimatum. This man spoke with a harsh, foreign intonation; and Ralph could not but believe he was a countryman of Michael Lensker's.

"Two days," he announced to his captive, "we give you to think over matters. So that you have more time to think, we leave you undisturbed. Nobody comes near you till then. If you go hungry, if you go thirsty, it will make you think the more. If you do not tell us where it is then, you die, like others in the matter." A cruel gleam came into his eye. "In the meantime, this Joan, this woman you seem so thick with, will be dealt with, too. But she does not die. Worse happens to her. Think over that in the next two days, when you are—alone. Listen!"

As if by a pre-arranged signal, faintly along the passages of the mine came the sound of a woman's whimpering. It was not a scream, it was much more affecting than that; just a low frightened moan, as if sheer terror had numbed the vocal chords. This was the first suggestion Ralph had had that Joan, too, was in the mine.

Ralph writhed, but vainly. His wrists had been bound together, and a long rope tied him by the leg to a beam behind.

His tormentor surveyed him grimly.

"If you break that, be careful where you wander," he said with slow emphasis. "This place will be totally dark in a minute, and some of the pits are deep. And as for your pretty little friend, think of her with us."

With mocking deliberation, the speaker lit a pungent black cigar, while Cranch chuckled evilly beside him.

Then they set off up the drive. Before they reached a bend in the passage, which was as far as Ralph could see in that direction, once more the awful whimpering sound came. This time he did not struggle ; and the others, who paused to watch in mockery for some display of distress, saw his head bent low as if in mute agony.

As they turned the corner, leaving him alone to face his ghastly ordeal, Ralph's blood froze suddenly in his veins. For the fourth time there came to him—hideous, unspeakable, appalling—that high and cackling laugh which on three occasions before had so thrilled him. Eerily it echoed through the empty cavities of the mine.

Cold sweat burst out upon his forehead. Then, with a supreme effort of mastery, Ralph bent himself upon the task before him. He did not know how soon the lights would go out.

That task was the untying with his teeth of the knots which bound his wrists. Once those were free, he knew he would have some chance of escape. Otherwise, the possibility of getting away was too remote to be considered a chance.

Desperately he worked. His bonds were easier to loosen than he had dared to hope. By the time sudden blackness had descended upon all his surroundings, his hands were free and he was already engaged on the comparatively easy business of releasing his leg.

Weak though he was, and precarious as was his situation, his freedom of movement gave him some sense of elation.

With quick, stealthy steps, Ralph hastened to the bend of the passage. At the corner he paused to listen.

Not a sound came to his ears ; and not a vestige of a glimmer of light came to his straining eyes.

The place was deathly, overwhelming.

He shouted, wildly, twice, thrice. No answer, save the multifarious echoes, returned.

Nothing but the lingering smell of cigar-smoke remained as evidence of the late presence of human beings. His enemies had gone, taking with them the other prisoner. The third man, he bitterly reflected, had probably seen to that.

He must do something. The thought of those devils concentrating their nefarious attention on a defenceless woman acted on him like a goad. Yet how was he to get out ?

The cigar smoke ! The thought struck him suddenly, a flash of hope.

Unwittingly the departing ones had left a trail behind them. By his nose would Ralph find the way of escape.

And he did. Although perhaps twenty

minutes had elapsed since he had been left to his loneliness, the aroma of the cigar had not had time to dissipate in that still air ; and, though his progress necessarily was slow, eventually Ralph found himself at the end of a passage which had led steeply upward for a considerable distance. The way was blocked with what seemed to be a huge boulder ; but pressing this firmly, Ralph found it gradually swinging outward, and the next instant he was standing in the gusty air of the night.

He had scarcely time to draw in a breathful of thankfulness, when a dark form appeared just below him. Ralph was not going to yield himself now to any of his gaolers ; so, gathering the last of his fast-ebbing strength, he hurled a jagged stone—and that was all he remembered.

" That must have been you, Detective Buxton," Ralph concluded, " and now, for God's sake, let us get away and look for Mrs. Lensker. They must have taken her back to that home she wrote about—the place with the green blinds."

" I don't think so," replied the detective calmly, " because there is no house such as you describe anywhere near the flat."

Ralph stared. His weary eyes showed wanly in the dim light.

" But they—don't you believe my story ? " he asked, with a sudden suspicion.

"Don't worry yourself over that," answered Buxton, pleasantly, but rather non-committally, his hearers thought; "I am not trying to put you off; but there is no place at all near the diggings. You see, I have searched around the flat pretty thoroughly, and know."

"What about the shanty near the road? Perhaps that is where they have taken her."

"Not there, either. You see, that place has been locked and shuttered since last Monday afternoon."

"Why is that?"

"Because Donald Mackay, whom you are charged with murdering, lived in that shanty, which belonged to old Peterson, his last employer, and the police have charge of it temporarily."

"Good heavens!"

"And from your description, the man you give an account of seeing there was Donald Mackay."

Chapter XXIII *Ralph's Theory*

SILENCE reigned for a minute in the little room after the detective's remark.

It was broken by some sounds from outside

—like those of a motor-car being brought to rest. Malfy went to the door.

"It's Williams," he announced, a minute later, "got here at last, after fixing up the breakdown. Shall I ask him to wait?"

"Yes," replied Buxton. "We might possibly want him shortly."

"Are you going to carry on the search for Mrs. Lensker right away then?" asked Ralph Harding hopefully, as Malfy left the room.

"No," the detective answered shortly.

"But—but it is *true* what I have been telling you, however things may look. If you can only find her——"

"We cannot do anything in that regard to-night. There will be ample time for investigation to-morrow——"

"They may be torturing her now!"

"I think not. Those threats would probably be largely for effect upon you. Your pals of the mine are well asleep now wherever they are, I'll bet. Oh, Malfy! was there any traffic on the road when you were walking down?"

"Yes, three or four cars, and a jinker. The last car passed me just on the near side of the township."

"And it went straight on towards Dalesbrook?"

"Yes."

"H'm! I see. . . . Look here, Harding,

if, as you say, that letter you received from Mrs. Lensker was a trap, do you think it likely that her captors would let too exact a description of where she was get through to you? They knew, or they ought to have known, that both you and she would shortly be wanted by the police. Letters have been intercepted before; and they would surely have protected themselves against the wrong party getting hold of it. If the police instead of you had got hold of your letter, the thing, to whoever followed it up, would have appeared as a hoax; for the investigating officer would simply have found no house, no green blinds, no prisoner.

"Now we want to find this Joan Lensker just as much as you do," the detective went on crisply. "You should know that yourself. After listening to what you have said, I have my own theory as to where she might be, and that will be tested to-morrow. But disregarding this for awhile, and coming to a very important matter, you mentioned some suspicions as to what these birds in the mine were after. What, in your opinion, is the game the gang are at?"

"Some sort of Bolshevik plot," Ralph replied.

Buxton frowned thoughtfully, but offered no comment.

"You see, Michael Lensker was a Russian, and this fellow in charge of the crew in the mine spoke like one. The two other men I saw there—Cranch, and the gloomy-looking fellow they called Dirk—would both make excellent anarchists. I had plenty of time to cogitate in there, and remembering what Madame Astra had said to me, put the idea into my mind. She had been in Russia, you know, and she hinted at political enemies. The whole atmosphere of the case seems Russian."

"You didn't get what the leader's name was, I suppose?" cut in the detective.

"No. He was only addressed as Sir; and, in his absence, referred to as the Chief. However, he wore a seal ring, and one day—or night, you couldn't tell the difference in there—I tried to make out the initials on it, when he had come close to bully me. There was an A and an H, and, I think, an N or a W."

"H'm! All Russians are not Bolsheviks, though."

"No. And all Bolsheviks are not Russians. Even in Australia—but I haven't told you all. In a part of the lighted passage near where I was kept, there was some sort of plant fitted up. Electrically worked, of course, from wherever they got their light. Whatever these machines are, I don't know. But they looked pretty sinister to me. There were two of them, besides a bench and some racks. Sometimes Cranch worked at them, and sometimes the other man, Dirk, though never very often. I feel sure they were making some infernal devices —time bombs, or things of that sort."

Buxton lit a cheroot, with great care.

"And what is it you think that these men actually wanted from you?"

"I can only imagine it is some document, vital to the safety of their cause, which Lensker or his wife had, and they think it might have got passed on to me."

"That is very feasible to the theory," the detective agreed. "And, in fact, I am rather struck by the theory. I think it is a clever one."

Ralph, not quite sure that the other was casting an oblique aspersion upon his evidence or not, burst out:

"Much of it can easily be proved, Mr. Buxton. Come down the mine again with me now—I am quite fit for that much exertion—and I can show you the machines I am talking about!"

The detective smiled, genially.

"There may be traps for the unwary there, Mr. Harding, may there not? But, seriously, you have impressed me very greatly, and there are just one or two little points I would like to check off before taking definite steps upon lines that I hope you will approve of. . . . Pilkington, can you bring me a rubber stamp pad from your office?"

When the little postmaster returned with the article required, Buxton took an impression of all Ralph's fingers upon a piece of white paper. These he examined with care, through a pocket magnifying glass, comparing them with two other pieces of white paper which he produced from an inside vest pocket.

" Ah ! " he exclaimed at last, " first points to you, Mr. Harding. After we have seen your friend Madame Astra, perhaps there should be some more points in your favour. Malfy, go and wake up Williams, if he's asleep, and tell him he is to drive me and a passenger to Melbourne, leaving in five minutes. . . . Pilkington, can I trouble you for an envelope ? . . . Mr. Harding, you are naturally under arrest until your name is cleared ; but whether the fact of your capture will or will not be announced in the papers during the next day or two, I do not know. Probably it will not be. Remember that, Pilkington, won't you ? Say not a word as to whom we have had here to-night to anybody—especially your estimable wife. Sure you haven't told her already ? Good ! . . .

" Ah, here is Malfy back. I have written you a few instructions in this note, Malfy. Act on them in the morning, first thing. Get what assistance you can. I guess that is all. Come along, Mr. Harding ! "

As the men turned to leave the room, and make their way out to the waiting motor-car, the engine of which was now softly throbbing, none of them noticed a white face slowly withdrawn from the dingy cracked window pane which looked into the premises from the back.

The night was now quite still outside, but just as dark as ever.

* * * * *

Daylight was breaking when the car, bearing Detective Buxton and his prisoner, Ralph Harding, pulled up in Russell Street, Melbourne.

Ralph was immediately placed in a room under guard, while Buxton sought a couch for a few hours' rest.

At precisely nine o'clock in the morning the latter had a short confab with his Chief; and at ten o'clock Madame Astra received a visitor. It was not the first time that the detective had visited her rooms in Collins Street.

The latest editions of morning papers—while full of an account of the inquest on the previous day at Dalesbrook—had nothing whatever to say about the apprehension of the person committed for trial. One publication, however, announced that it had exclusive information about a suspect at Ballarat, and that Detective Hammond confidently expected an early arrest.

Madame Astra greeted her visitor by the extension of a limp hand.

" Ah, Mr. Buxton," she exclaimed, " so you come to see me again. You are puzzled about —that case in this day's papers, I see."

The detective smiled, as he seated himself comfortably in a luxurious, chintz-covered chair. Madame had received him in the room which she had told Diana Allison she used for " the pale ladies " and such. But it was not any lack of vividness on the part of her visitor that influenced her now ; it was the official's creature comfort that she was considering.

" You cannot claim any very deep knowledge for guessing that, I am afraid," he replied easily. " Most people must think as you do."

" That is so. But most people do not know what I know." And the little woman looked at the detective keenly.

" And what is that ? " asked the other.

" Shall I tell you ? Yes," she replied, " it is this. You are still just as much in the dark as to who killed Michael Lensker—and that other man—*although you have arrested a man for those crimes.*"

Buxton could not but show his surprise.

" *Arrested ?* " was all he could gasp. " *Arrested ?* "

" Yes. The morning news says nothing about that. But I know. You caught the man you sought yesterday ; only to catch more doubts as well."

That Peter Buxton was staggered at the little woman's positive statement goes without saying. Outside a very few officials connected with the case, nobody knew—or should have known—of Ralph Harding's capture. Even his particular colleague, Hammond, due back from Ballarat that morning, was still in ignorance of the matter.

"How," he asked at length, "do you know this?"

Madame Astra answered half-amusedly:

"I just read the signs. . . . Am I not right?"

"Maybe you are," the detective admitted.

"This young man you catch—Harding, is it not?—is the innocent one. I am glad to see you now think that."

"Seeing that you are so good at—reading the signs, Madame," said Buxton thoughtfully, "there are a few questions I would like to ask you."

"Ah, it pleases me to assist Detective Buxton, since he values my opinion," rejoined the other graciously. "There are others in his Department who have no love for the like of me."

"We have never worried you much, anyhow," returned the detective. "I know that sometimes we are instructed to deal with—other—er—consultants, who pretend to be what they are not. But—you understand—we have never seen much harm in you. And I don't think we shall. But let us be frank, Madame. You are clever enough, I am sure, to see that it will be the better for us both."

The fortune-teller's white teeth flashed.

"Speak, Mr. Buxton," she exclaimed. "Ask what you like."

"You knew Lensker well, in Russia," he commenced, "and you were the first to recognize him here. Since you are so sure that Harding did not, who did kill him?"

"Ah, I cannot tell you that. I have not—the signs. Would that I had!"

"His wife?"

"No. No. You do not think so, really? She innocent. At first I did think different, but no. She innocent."

"Yet it does not seem a very innocent thing to be with another man in his office at night," said the detective, watching the other closely.

"But she was not, that night," came the quick response.

"We have evidence to show that she was there alone with Harding."

"Then the evidence is—false. Maybe the young man who gave it—wish to serve his own ends. . . . No. No. Michael Lensker's wife is a victim, too—a prisoner."

"H'm! just as Harding says," muttered the detective; then, more loudly, "Harding had a talk with you before he disappeared, didn't he?"

"Yes—I go to see him. We are to be straight—frank, are we not? What he told you about me is true."

"How do you know what he told me?"

"Ah, you see, I read character. I know this young man has spoken to you, because you come to me; and I know that he has told you the truth, because I know him."

Accepting the strange woman's remarks at their face value, which he knew was the wisest proceeding, Buxton continued:

"Who were these enemies of Michael Lensker of whom you hinted to Harding?"

"Ah, I will tell you. For I now see that you have a glimmering of the truth." Madame Astra commenced to speak more rapidly, her eyes closing slightly. "Michael, before he came here, had been in trouble—political trouble—in Russia. He made enemies; but one especially, Herivan Alexovitch, a bad man, a wicked man, a man with the laugh of a fiend. Alexovitch swear to do him harm. I, as you know, am then in secret circles, too, for Russia. I hear of what Alexovitch swear.

"My love for Michael made me tell him, warn him of what was to come; for Alexovitch was powerful. Together we leave Russia and sail for Australia.

"I see very little of Michael after awhile. Last year I hear Alexovitch is coming to this country; maybe, I think, to blackmail Michael. Then I hear of Michael's death. I do not *know* anything, but I think. Michael is a very jealous man, and lately he has had very pretty wife. There are more than one way of making trouble for oneself.

"But it is not through his wife that Michael died; though it is through her this young man might have—met his death."

The speaker ceased. After a short silence the detective spoke.

"You are entirely disconnected from politics and the secret services now, Madame, aren't you?"

"Yes. I lead but the private life."

"To what faction over there did this Herivan Alexovitch belong?"

"The Bolsheviki."

"Ah! Do you think it possible that Alexovitch has been sent over here to hatch up some sort of communistic campaign against our Government; perhaps, meeting Lensker, he tried to blackmail him into joining the movement, and that's how the trouble started?" And Buxton made a brief reference to what Ralph Harding had described as seen by him in the mine at Nullabong Flat.

"Such is possible, very possible," the soothsayer answered, nodding her head. "But—it does not yet give us the man who himself thrust the knife into Michael Lensker's heart. Him I want to find!"

"It sets us on the right track, though!"

"Ah, yes, the right track! This Herivan Alexovitch, look out for him. You should know him with ease—he looks so Russian—and his ears are split for rings. When emotions have him, he is the devil. . . . Should you find him before I, bring him to me; I shall tell by his eyes if he be guilty or not!"

* * * * *

On his way back to Russell Street, the detective felt distinctly pleased as the result of his visit. He was, he felt sure, on the right track—as the soothsayer had said.

There were now several strings in his hands, and, when he pulled them at the proper moments, he was confident that the final solution would not be far away.

Ralph Harding's story and the evidence of Madame Astra seemed closely to fit in together; and Buxton even expected that he already knew where he could lay hands upon a man answering pretty closely to the description of Herivan Alexovitch—though the name by which he went was rather different from that.

The result of Constable Malfy's investigations that morning should be very important.

The case was assuming a magnitude undreamed of at first. He had no doubt now that the thing which Harding's aggressors were so anxious to recover would be some document or plan vital to their anarchistic cause.

If he could but find that too !

Buxton was so pleased with himself that he decided to give the newspaper representatives who awaited him some hint as to the amazing developments which might follow.

The only jarring note—and that did not obtrude itself much—was how Madame Astra could have known of Harding's capture which took place so late the night before. Shrewd judge of things as she was, the woman could scarcely have read that in Buxton's eyes, or told it from his "character." Perhaps, after all, it was just a wonderful guess.

Chapter XXIV *Diana's Impulse*

IT is probable that the average man's first night in a lockup—though I trust the average man is not doomed to such an experience—would be one of acute torment.

Ralph Harding, however, from the moment he lay down upon the hard bed that was to be his, knew no more until he was awakened by the entry of Buxton at about eleven o'clock the next morning. Worn and weary as he was, he had simply glided off into swift oblivion.

The detective had left special instructions regarding his prisoner; and Ralph was not disturbed until he felt the big man's hand upon his shoulder.

"Wake up, old chap," exclaimed the latter, shaking gently. "You are not in the mine now."

Ralph smiled as he rubbed his eyes.

"No—but!" was all he said.

Confidence between the two had been established during the ride down to the city in the car the night before, and Ralph had made one or two suggestions towards conducting the future campaign which the detective had agreed to—provisionally.

"I have seen your friend, Madame Astra," Buxton went on, dropping half a cheroot upon the floor, and extinguishing it with his toe, "and—er—am quite satisfied with the visit. She has given me a valuable clue; and you can rest yourself quite easy as to how the interview affects you. There is only one thing that puzzles me—from your point of view, so to speak."

Ralph glanced at the other a trifle anxiously.

"What is that?" he asked.

"There seems to be no satisfactory explanation as to what Lensker was doing in your building," the other went on, "if your theory is correct."

"Oh, I thought I had suggested that before," said Ralph, quite calmly now. "Perhaps Lensker was coming to see me—as his wife's agent in the city—to seek my advice in some way over this Bolshevistic entanglement in which he found himself. It seems quite likely that he should. Perhaps that was what his wife was worrying about too. The others, learning of his intentions, thought he was coming with some plans or documents—which have been missing ever since."

Buxton nodded understandingly, and then went off on to another subject.

"I am making special arrangements for you to be granted bail shortly, if you want it. Of course, you cannot be acquitted until a trial comes on, but there is no objection to bail under the circumstances. If there is any friend or other person you would like to communicate with—— ?"

"There is," answered Ralph promptly; and he gave Hal Roach's name and number.

"That shall be attended to. Of course, as we agreed last night, the fact of you're being—discovered, must not get abroad. I am doubly desirous of this now. Your friend must understand that."

"Of course. I take it you are going to try that scheme of mine, of setting a trap for that gang to-morrow—when my two days are up—down in that old claim?"

"Sure thing; unless something else turns up in the meantime."

"Have you heard anything of——"

"Not yet, but I am expecting word from Malfy before long. Well, I'll go and see about getting in touch with this friend of yours," and, with a cheery nod, the detective left the cell.

* * * * *

Hal Roach's "Lancia" was driven at its fastest speed since that eventful night in Queen Street, after he received a guarded message from Russell Street. He arrived at the Police Headquarters in double-quick time. The risk of another fine for speeding on this occasion did not worry him.

Presently he was grasping his friend's hand warmly.

"Ralph!" he exclaimed sympathetically, "so they have got you! But *I*, at least, know there is some mistake. You couldn't have done those things!"

"Thank you, old chap," responded Ralph feelingly, "I knew that you would always—trust me. I understand that things have been very black against me; but I'm to be released on bail."

" On bail ? Good ! Come and stay with us, and we'll engage the very best legal advice——"

" You would not mind a—committed murderer sleeping under your roof ? "

" Committed murderer, shucks ! " cried Hal. " That was only at the inquest. Nobody has heard your defence yet. If I didn't think so before, I'd know it now—you didn't do it, or they would not be letting you out on bail."

" I didn't do it all right," replied Ralph, smiling a little wryly, " and even the detectives don't think so now."

Hal's eyes lit up.

" Great Golly, that's good," he exclaimed delightedly, " and soon everything in the camp will be all right again. Only——"

His voice trailed away strangely, and Ralph, quick to notice a changed expression in his friend's face, asked :

" Only what, Hal ? "

" Only that some of your friends—naturally, I suppose, seeing what they are—have been too ready to believe the worst of you, in several ways. . . . But that is sure to be put right shortly."

" Hal, how is Diana ? "

" Diana ? Oh, she's pretty well, Ralph."

" Have you seen her lately ? "

" Not since Saturday."

" I have been worrying about her."

" I do not wonder—of course you have. She has been very much affected—like the rest of us. But when I go back and tell them all of the glorious news——"

" Oh, you must not do that just yet," cautioned Ralph. " My being here, and so forth, must be kept strictly dark for a day or two, for reasons which you shall know shortly. There are certain plans, you see. But tell Diana, Hal. Ask her to come and see me here, if—if she doesn't mind. I have permission for that. Ask her to come at once, Hal."

Hal inclined his head.

" Very good, Ralph," he said. " I am impatient to know things, but—I shall get along and see Diana."

" Thanks again, old chap," replied Ralph, taking the other by the hand ; " and Hal, I am going to ask Buxton if he minds you joining in at what we hope will be the finish to-morrow. There may be some excitement."

A broad smile swept across Hal's face.

" That'll just suit me down to the ground and up again," he remarked, and, after a few more words, was gone.

* * * * *

While Ralph Harding waited impatiently in his guarded room for the arrival of Diana Allison—he had so much to say to her, and he yearned for the sight of her, after all he had been through—Detective Hammond strolled into the Police Headquarters unannounced. Judging by the expression in his little eyes, he was by no means pleased with himself.

He sought Buxton's room, and found that official leaning far back in his chair, feet on table, in an attitude of contemplation. A smouldering cheroot was in his mouth.

"Why, Hammie!" exclaimed the big detective, in a bantering manner, "back from Ballarat so soon? How's the early arrest?"

"Ah," replied the other disgustedly, "there's no early arrest. The fellow I was put on to was a three-quarter Dago, and not a bit like Harding at all. So I heard of a car coming this way, and got a lift."

"So you missed my message, then?"

"What message?"

"A wire to say that I had made an arrest, and for you to report here."

"Never got it. Anyhow I'm here. But *did* you make an arrest?"

"I am afraid so. But much has happened since we last met on the Dalesbrook train, old boy. Sit down there—have a cheroot? No?—and I'll tell you."

For ten minutes, in the clear, concise manner he used when making verbal reports, Peter Buxton spoke.

Hammond listened attentively, but gloomily.

It seemed as if he could not rid himself of the depression caused by his own wild-goose chase.

"Well, you've got Harding all right," was his comment, when the other had finished. "But I wouldn't go too much on this yarn about Bolshevik plots. You've still got a strong case against him."

"I'm convinced that we haven't," returned the other, "especially after seeing Madame Astra."

"Why, those two may be working in collusion," objected Hammond. "If Harding didn't kill Lensker—and I agree that possibly he didn't, seeing his finger-prints were not those found in the lift at Lombardy Chambers, as it turns out—I think it quite likely that *she* did. It looked a woman's way of killing a man to me; and she was an old lover of Lensker's, wasn't she? Jealous as a rattlesnake, I'll bet."

"That point doesn't need discussion, Hammie. It is true that we still have some finger-prints for which an owner has not yet been found; but I am willing to bet they are not Madame's."

"Whose are they, then?"

"I have a very good idea—ah, what's this?"

The door opened, and a messenger appeared.

"A telegram from Constable Malfy, Dalesbrook, sir," he announced.

Buxton nodded, and the messenger handed over the sheet of paper, and departed.

"Have investigated suspected house"—the detective read—"found nobody but housekeeper at home. Nothing discovered, but arrested a suspicious man lurking in grounds. What instructions?"

A thoughtful frown creased the reader's brow. Hammond, who was watching intently, asked rather querulously:

"Not another blank, surely?"

Buxton's frown became a grin.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Hammie, though I'd be sorry to disappoint you. Just a little readjustment of ideas required, that is all. Hullo, another interruption!"

Once more the messenger had come to the door.

"Prisoner Harding wants to see you, sir," he said. "Says it is most urgent."

* * * * *

Ralph had waited long after he had hoped would be necessary, without any appearance of Diana. Time dragged by, and instead of her returning straight back with Hal Roach, as he had pictured her doing, she did not come. Restlessly he stamped about the narrow confines of his chamber; torturing thoughts filled his brain. He was impatient for the sight of her.

At last he heard footsteps coming down the passage outside. Perhaps this was she at last!

Hal Roach, with a prison attendant, appeared, but no Diana.

"Why, Hal!" Ralph exclaimed, then stopped aghast, as if reading the downcast look upon the other's face.

"She—she could not come," Hal commenced lamely. "I do not think she was quite herself."

"Did she not *want* to?"

Hall looked straight at his friend, and then went on:

"I had better tell you exactly as things were, then you will know."

"Tell me, whatever it is," demanded Ralph fiercely. His long wait—it was now after one o'clock—had jarred on his frayed nerves.

"Well, it was this way," Hal went on. "When I went to Diana's place, Cyril Clarke was with her." The listener clenched his hands tightly together, but forbore to interrupt. "I took her aside, and told her that you were here, and tried to deliver your message. Perhaps Diana wasn't really herself, for, before I could stop her, she blurted out to that fellow Clarke where you were. Ralph, I——"

"Go on," Ralph said grimly, "anything else?"

"Yes; I am afraid I did not do much good. Almost immediately Clarke made some excuse and left us, and I had Diana alone. I tried to reason with her, and tell her that she might be doing you much harm. But she didn't seem to care. She kept referring to that other woman—you know—Mrs. Lensker."

"Good God!" cried Ralph, "and I asked her to trust me."

"I think that fellow Clarke has been putting in some tales to her about that. Inflaming her imagination, the rotten cad," said the other loyally. "He has been with her too much of late. He is a queer fellow, and I never liked Clarke. He seems to have strange acquaintances. For instance, when I was coming away from the Allison's place, half an hour ago. I knew I was low in petrol, so I called in at a garage near by. There was Clarke, just lounging about, although he had dashed off in such a hurry."

Hal kept on talking, in an effort to distract his friend's mind from the disturbing thoughts which he felt that his news would at first create.

"I heard him ask an attendant when the owner of a big double-seater Hudson, which he pointed out amongst the other cars, would be back. Wanted to borrow a ride somewhere, I suppose. Before my tank was filled the owner did come in, and a queer bird he was. Wore a yellow dust-coat; looked like a foreigner. But what attracted my attention to him was the noise he made."

"What was that?" asked Ralph dully.

"Oh, the queerest laugh you ever heard! Clarke said a few words to this foreign bird, then the whole place was filled with the most hideous cackling. Made everybody — why, what's the matter?"

Ralph had suddenly seized the other's wrist. On his face was a look of the most intense excitement.

"What!" he cried, "where was that? when? How long ago? Can you find that garage again?"

The other answered, stupefactively:

"About twenty minutes ag—of course I can! Why?"

It was then that Ralph Harding sent his urgent message to Buxton.

Chapter XXV *A Breakneck Pursuit*

DETECTIVE BUXTON lost no time in being convinced of the necessity of urgent action.

Taking upon himself the responsibility, he released Ralph Harding, and together with the dubious Hammond and a police constable, they immediately repaired to Hal Roach's car.

"Plot to get Harding away!" whispered Hammond to his big colleague, before they stepped into the "Lancia," but Buxton merely grinned amiably. Unlike most men, he never lost his temper during action that called for speed.

"Can you drive fast?" he asked Hal Roach as they climbed aboard.

The latter smiled.

"You forget the night of the 22nd of October," he remarked over his shoulder, as he let in the clutch.

"Then I'll forget to-day, too, if you get to this garage quick," replied the detective.

In record time Hal Roach threaded his way out of the city traffic; and barely a quarter of an hour had elapsed when the car skidded spectacularly to rest before a gaudily painted "Service Station" in High Street, Malvern.

"The Hudson has gone," exclaimed Hal, glancing through the wide doorway.

Buxton leaped to the ground, motioning the others to remain.

The garage proprietor, who was standing near, came forward.

"There was a big Hudson double-seater here a few minutes ago," the detective commenced. "Do you know where it has gone?"

The other looked Buxton over a trifle doubt-fully before replying; but happening to glance at the helmeted form of the policeman seated in the back of the car which had just arrived, evidently decided that he could answer with a clear conscience.

"I don't know where it went exactly," he replied. "It went about ten minutes ago. I don't think it is coming back."

"Hm! How many went out in it?"

"Just the one—the owner."

"Is he a regular customer of yours?"

"Yes; he always leaves his car here when he is in town."

"So he comes from the country, eh?"

"Yes, a place called—— Alf!" the proprietor shouted, turning around and addressing some invisible person in the rear, "where does Westerby come from?"

"Ah—er—Dalesbrook!" came the muffled response.

"Dalesbrook," echoed the proprietor, "up off the Bendigo road."

"Thanks," replied the detective, "and you reckon he's left for there now?"

"I reckon so, unless he's calling at some place first. He didn't say he was coming back here to-night."

"And he left in a great hurry?"

"Well, he didn't lose any time."

"By the way, what's his number?"

" An easy one, 429."

" Sure that's right ? "

" Positive."

Buxton then turned to Hal Roach.

" Tank full ? " he asked.

" Yes—just filled it, here."

" Well, we'll take a run into the country." Buxton spoke with swift decision. " Bain," he addressed the constable, who turned respectfully, " you get out here, and proceed to Headquarters by tram. We might want all the speed we can get out of this car, so we won't take more weight than we need. And here, dispatch this telegram to Constable Malfy, Dalesbrook."

The detective scribbled a few words on a leaf in his pocket-book, tore it out, and handed it to the policeman, who was now standing beside him.

" That is all now," he said, clambering into the seat beside the young man at the wheel. " I suppose you know the road that leads to Dalesbrook ? "

Hal Roach nodded, fingering the gear lever lovingly.

" Right-ho, then. Let her go."

* * * * *

As soon as they were clear of the inner suburbs Hal " let her go "—properly.

He was in his element. Most of that wildness and love of speed which had characterized him before he received that chastener consequent upon his connection with the Lombardy murder, now came back to him with a rush.

His machine was a fast model—and he joyed in this opportunity of showing its speed with impunity, as it were. He did not quite know what all this hurry was about, but that did not bother Hal. It was all to some good purpose.

Twice he made his passengers hold their breath as he turned corners at reckless speed. But Hal was a skilful driver with it all, and his recklessness was always tempered with judgment.

It was not until they entered a long straight stretch of hard macadam road, where the outer boundaries of the city were finally left in their rear, that they got any hint of their quarry.

Then, far ahead—more than a mile—a car appeared in front. It was travelling away from the city, and appeared to be moving fast.

" That looks like the Hudson," cried Hal to the detective at his side. " Same colour, anyway."

" At this pace we ought soon to see," returned the other. " Keep her at it."

Hal kept her at it; but the other driver appeared to be doing so too. In the next three miles the Lancia was still above half a mile behind.

The road hereabouts was far from good, the macadam being chawed and churned up into hard ridges, between which lay long beds of dust. The wheels rattled and hammered as the car drove over the rough surface; the passengers clung on to the sides, and hoped that they would not be lifted too far from their seats.

From behind the car ahead, a moving cloud of dust trailed obliquely off the road, like heavy smoke from a speeding locomotive. There was a strong cross breeze, and at times this literally sang in the ears.

Ralph, seated in the back with the silent but watchful Hammond, began to feel a throb of exultation.

After his period of travail, his suffering in the mine, and his experience of prison, this call to action came as a wonderful relief. In the thrill of the chase he was able to subdue, if not entirely forget, the feelings that Hal's news of Diana had engendered. They were a drag to his spirits, certainly; but the prospect immediately before him made the removal of most of the clouds on his horizon an early probability.

Everything in Buxton's mind he did not know; but Ralph was sure that the detective—with himself—was convinced that this ubiquitous but elusive man with the cackle held the key to many mysteries. Westerby, his name appeared to be. The name conveyed nothing to Ralph.

He had not, of course, read the newspaper account of the finding of Donald Mackay's body. Therefore, he could not tell the train of reasoning that this information set up in Buxton's brain.

However, Westerby—the hideous cackler—was apparently well known to Cyril Clarke—Cyril Clarke, his rival and detractor. This fact offered much food for thought—thought that could lead nowhere just yet, however, until further facts were known.

Presently a shout burst in upon Ralph's meditations, and he gazed eagerly forward with the others.

" That's him all right ! " Hal called. " You can see his number, too."

The Lancia had drawn up to within a hundred yards of the big two-seater in front. The bad stretch had slowed the other down, and apparently up till now—though proceeding at so great a pace—he was ignorant of the fact that he was being pursued.

Something, however, now seemed to warn him of this. The hood was down, and the lonely driver—wearing an unmistakable yellow dust-coat—suddenly looked back over his shoulder apprehensively.

" Yes, that is Clarke's pal—Westerby, whatever his name is," cried Hal. "By Jove, he's crowding on speed."

He was. From that moment the big Hudson suddenly shot ahead. Obviously Westerby had no desire to be overtaken.

Hal too "stepped on it." There was plenty of reserve in his engine yet. The speedometer needle gradually crept from forty to fifty miles an hour.

It was a wonder the big car in front, empty as it was over the rear wheels, could hold the road. It bounced and swayed in a manner sickening to behold.

At this stage, more than half the distance to Dalesbrook had been covered; and for twenty minutes the strenuous pursuit continued. After the descent of a long, curving hill—accomplished at giddy speed—the road surface materially improved for a few miles, and here the cars simply streaked.

In spite of his great turn of speed, Hal could do no more than keep within distance of his quarry. Never more than a quarter of a mile separated them, never could he draw closer than eighty or ninety yards.

The wavering needle on the dashboard climbed over the sixty-five mark; trees, houses, traffic, all objects on the landscape flew past as if whipped away in a whirlwind.

"You're holding him," yelled Buxton. "He can't get away unless we stop. And if he stops —and he must stop sometime—he's a goner."

Fortunately there was not much other traffic on the road; but what there was was left gasping in vortexes of dust.

The road now entered upon a belt of timbered country and grew rough again.

"I'll try to keep this up. Hang on!" shouted Hal and the wind almost cut the words from his lips. "He dare not or he'll go over. I think he's smashed a spring now."

Crashing and shuddering, the Lancia plunged on, spurts of loose earth hissing from beneath its tyres like chips from an emery wheel. Under the overhanging trees, the dust from the car ahead hung heavily, making it difficult to see.

Sure enough the space between the two machines diminished.

Now and again when a rift in the dust permitted, Westerby could be seen taking a rapid glance over his shoulder at those behind. He seemed to be anxiously judging the distance.

On the very crest of the rise, where a thick growth of saplings came close on the left, the big Hudson seemed to drop its speed like a bird that is winged, the tail swung around with a rasping shriek of tyres, and all was lost to sight behind the sudden upshooting of smoke-like dust.

"He's over!" cried Buxton; while Hal did his best. He jambed down both feet, and wrenched his wheel around. The Lancia dashed past on the uttermost edge of the road, furthest from where they had last seen the other.

With a squeaking of brakes the pursuers came to rest forty yards past the clump of saplings, and turned their heads.

There was no other car to be seen.

Amid the faint wraith of the dust-cloud that remained, they made out another road which had been hidden from view.

Far away through the timber they heard the distant purring of a motor.

"Tricked us!" yelled Buxton.

"Great Guns! but what a superb bit of driving," said Hal Roach admiringly.

The Lancia's occupants looked at one another amazedly.

"What do we do now?" asked Ralph Harding, after a pause.

Hammond, who by now had developed all the excitement of the chase, cried out:

"Turn and after him! Get after him!"

Hal was about to comply, when Buxton held up his hand.

"I don't think so," he counselled. "That road may have branches, and anyway Westerby will know it better than we do. He's got a good start, too. Drive straight on. We are not far from Nullabong Flat now."

"What's the idea?" asked Hammond, still showing traces of his excitement.

"One I should have thought of before. We shall call at Haynes's house. I expect we shall find what we want there."

"Haynes's house? What, the chief Crown witness?"

"Yes," replied Buxton calmly. "I have already learned something about that Crown witness that would amaze you. He is, you remember, avowedly the employee of the man we have just been following. Since—er—adjusting my ideas this morning, I fancy I have lit upon the truth. Drive on, Mr. Roach, if you please. But you needn't go so hurriedly this time."

* * * * *

At Haynes's house, just beyond the little township of Nullabong Flat, the party did, as Detective Buxton had prophesied, come across something of vital importance.

In an innocent-looking barn, separated from the main house, the party discovered, held close prisoner, a young and flower-like girl in the early twenties.

She greeted her deliverers with cries of thankfulness, and one she recognized and called by his christian name.

She had for gaolers a squat, fierce-looking man, and his harridan of a wife. The man's name was Geordie Cranch.

Haynes himself was not at home.

Joan Lensker had been found.

Chapter XXVI *Joan Lensker*

THE room where Joan Lensker had been found was on the top floor of the barn at the back of Haynes's house. It had been fitted up roughly but comfortably with a bed, chairs, and a modest-looking dressing-table. It scarcely tallied with the description contained in her letter to Ralph Harding. The only means of access was a movable ladder, to guard which one or other of her gaolers was always in attendance down below. It happened that they were both present in the space beneath the loft when the detective and his party arrived. Cranch's eyes nearly dropped out of his head at the sight of Ralph Harding.

After the first emotions of the meeting with the kidnapped girl were over, Hal Roach was told off to "mind" the cripple and his wife who were handcuffed together for the sake of convenience—and Buxton turned to Joan Lensker.

"Now, Madame, if you please," he said, "we would like to hear your story from the start."

The girl regarded the speaker with wide blue eyes.

"This is Detective Buxton, Joan; and this is Detective Hammond," said Ralph Harding, desirous of putting her at her ease. "You need not be frightened of them. Tell them everything."

"Oh, I'm glad you brought them, Ralph," replied the girl innocently, "because we might need them. There is so much to do, and I am sure you will need their help."

Under different circumstances, Peter Buxton might have been tempted to smile at this; but he felt he had a painful duty to perform.

"Before you begin, Madame," he said sympathetically, "I fear I have some bad news for you. Your husband——"

The girl's eyes clouded a little as she answered:

"I know. He is dead. I—I have heard about it. But I—I have got over that now. It is about that I want to tell you something. You need not worry about my feelings."

"Do you know who did it, then?" cut in Hammond shortly.

Buxton turned round upon his colleague.

"Easy, Hammie," he commanded. "Let

the lady tell the whole story in her own way from the beginning. . . . Suppose, Madame, you tell us why you sent that first letter to Mr. Harding, asking him to come up to Dalesbrook and see you upon a most urgent matter? That seems to be the start of things."

"Not quite," replied the girl thoughtfully. "But I shall try to tell you everything as it happened in order. That's right, Ralph, isn't it?"

"That is so, Joan. Assume that we know nothing."

Joan Lensker seated herself easily upon the end of the bed, motioning the others to avail themselves of the remaining seating accommodation in the loft—two hard chairs and a kerosene box. In spite of her experiences of the many days past, she retained a girlish freshness which evoked admiration. A mass of red-gold hair was done in an effective coil over each ear; a simple cotton gown showed off her slight but well-rounded figure to great advantage. She looked as pretty as a picture.

No wonder Hal Roach, though he had only had but a few minutes' view of her, was already chafing at his monotonous occupation as watcher on the ground floor of the barn.

"Well," she commenced, speaking in a low, clear voice, "I had better start with my marriage with Michael Lensker, early last year. It was a rapid courtship, and I had only known Michael three months before the wedding—which took place in Sydney, where I come from. I don't think I ever really loved him, but I was fascinated by his charming manners and appearance of cultured prosperity. I now know that he never loved me.

"We had not been married more than three months when we came to live at Dalesbrook. Michael had told me that he had a private income, but it seemed to me that he carried on strange business dealings with all sorts of people who came to our house.

"He was always getting different pieces of jewellery — necklaces, tiaras, bracelets — and these he would lend to me, and persuade me to wear in the presence of visitors, but rarely did he make me a gift. He used to visit other houses around Dalesbrook, too—generally wealthy people's homes—and on these occasions, too, Michael always wanted me looking my best. We went in much for entertainment.

"There were times when Michael used to be absent himself from our home for days at a stretch, leaving me alone with a maid.

"After a while this business used to mystify me exceedingly, especially as I noticed that Michael's feelings towards me—except in the presence of visitors—had apparently cooled considerably; though he seemed a very jealous man if others showed attention to me, as they sometimes did.

" I began to suspect that I was only part of a scheme of things—required as an ornament to impress others, or as an emblem of respectability, so that Michael could have an unquestioned entré into the homes of the better-class people in that district, of whom there were many.

" All the people who came to our place, however, were by no means of that type. Amongst them was one man who impressed me deeply. He called often, not only in a social way, but privately. Many times he and Michael would lock themselves away in a room together, and talk for hours. I never liked this man, and it was generally after his visits that Michael went away on his mysterious trips.

" Westerby—that was the visitor's name—was a local resident too. He had a fine place not far out of Dalesbrook, and owns, I believe, a good bit of property in the district."

" He owns the place we are now in," commented Buxton.

" This Westerby," Joan Lensker continued, " appeared to be of the same nationality as my husband, although I never heard them speak anything but English—and so at first I did not wonder at their appearance of close friendship. But after awhile it struck me that they were not really friends, and that Michael in some way was utterly and irretrievably under the thumb of the other.

"Michael became more worried and inattentive as time went on, and Westerby began to adopt a hectoring attitude in our house, even towards me.

"One day, when the door of the room they used was ajar, and I happened to be passing, I heard this horrible man laugh—he had the cruellest laugh I have ever heard—then say to Michael in his loud, harsh voice, 'Better run any risks with the stupid police of this country than bring about the vengeance of——'

"I did not hear the finish of this sentence; but it was then that I wrote that first letter to Mr. Harding. I was frightened, I needed advice, and I had to speak to somebody. I presume Mr. Harding has already told you our relationship, and why he was really the only one I could approach in the matter?"

Detective Buxton inclined his head understandingly.

"You were a long way from Sydney," he commented.

The girl went on:

"I was never able to keep the appointment I made. Michael had gone away the day previous—to Melbourne, he told me. I think somehow he suspected that I had written to Mr. Harding. I had done so before on other matters which had troubled me, and my husband knew that Mr. Harding stood in the capacity of adviser to me, for I had told him. I think in a way, he was jealous of Mr. Harding, in his unreasonable manner; for, although Michael did not inspire confidences from me, he resented me going to another with them, no matter what the circumstances were.

"However, I was alone in the house this day—my maid was ill, and had gone to her mother—and I was just about to set out for Dalesbrook to meet Mr. Harding in accordance with my arrangements, when I had an unwelcome visitor—Westerby.

"He asked me why my husband had gone to the city the day before, and flew into a violent rage when I told him I did not know. He demanded to know if Michael had left anything with me before he went; I asked him what, and that merely made his temper worse.

"I was frightened then, and I made to get into my car, which was in the shed, and drive off and leave him.

"'No, you don't, you little schemer!' he cried. 'I don't let you out of my sight till I have got it!'

"With that, Westerby called out to some one in his own car outside, and two men came."

"Do you know their names?" asked Buxton.

"Yes. One was called Dirk, and the other was addressed as Mac. Mackay I found his full name was."

"Donald Mackay, eh!" murmured the detective.

"The first man had visited our house with Westerby before, but I had never seen the other," Joan Lensker continued. "However, the Mackay man, who didn't seem such a bad sort, guarded me, while the other two ransacked the house. It was no use my objecting or calling out. I was half a mile from the nearest help.

"At the end, Westerby and his man evidently did not find what they were looking for. I was forcibly dragged out to a big two-seater car in the road, and pushed in. A handkerchief was placed over my mouth; but screaming would not have been much good, anyway.

"The hoods were down, and we set off at what seemed to be a terrible pace. I could not see where we were going. Once, when I thought I saw houses through the side curtains, I tried to scream. But the man Dirk nearly throttled me, which made Westerby laugh in his blood-curdling way. After that, I think I fainted.

"The next thing I knew, I was in the strangest place I have ever seen. It was a big underground passage, cut out of the earth and lighted by electricity. I was lying on the floor on some old blankets. The man Mackay was sitting on a box not far away, still 'minding' me; and he seemed sort of ashamed of himself for doing such a thing. Poor man, I suppose he was forced into doing such things, and could not get out of it.

" I found out later it was an old mine that I was in, which had been fitted up for some purpose by Westerby and his scoundrels. I wondered if Michael were a prisoner there too. But soon I found out he was not.

" Presently Westerby came along the passage, and seeing my eyes open, started to badger me again. I repeated I did not know what he wanted, and then he told me a terrible thing.

" 'We have killed your husband to get it,' he said in the most sinister voice I have heard. 'And we shall kill you too, if necessary. Lensker was a thief and a traitor, and he died. If you know where it is, and do not tell us, you shall die, too. And so shall that young friend of yours in Melbourne, Harding. Just think over that.'

" I fainted again, then ; but the other thought I was shamming, for Mackay told me afterwards that Westerby kicked me where I lay.

" For two or three days after that my life was a nightmare. There was an endless succession of bullying and ill-treatment. Only for Mackay, who was good to me in his rough way, when the others were absent, I think I would have died.

" One day, Westerby and the other man—Dirk—forced me to write a letter. To you, Ralph. Did you receive it ? "

" I did," replied Harding, " and acted upon it. These gentlemen know all about that. But go on."

" Mackay became very sympathetic towards me. One night he came and said that the coast was clear, and that he was going to help me escape. I could not help asking him what the others would do to him when they found out, but he only laughed and said he had thought out a plan. There was another prisoner tied up in another passage of the mine, he said—a man ; the man was at present unguarded and he was going to let him go later, too, and make it appear that this prisoner had freed himself and overpowered Mackay. ' Clever, ain't it ? ' he asked. Poor fellow !

" Something told me, Ralph, that the other prisoner was you—come in answer to my letter."

" It was," was Ralph's laconic comment.

" Although I was excited, I asked Mackay to let you go first, Ralph, but he would not. He wanted to make a certainty of me getting free, at any rate. If he had done what I suggested, perhaps he would not have met with his death !

" We went up a long narrow passage, and

paused before a big boulder that blocked the way. It was then the poor fellow spoke his last words to me.

" 'I am sorry, Miss,' he said haltingly, 'for what I helped to do to your husband. I didn't know he had such a bonza little wife, or I—I wouldn't have done it, gaws truth I wouldn't, though Westerby has got us all by the hip. I'd never seen murder done before, cuss me if I have, and I can't get it out of my mind—especially after seeing you. Here,' he concluded, opening his hand and showing something that sparkled, 'I've got a keepsake for you, something that was your husband's. I'll give it to you before I leave you outside; you can remember a chap who is sorry he's a waster by it.'

"After that, the boulder moved away, and we went out into the night. We had not gone far when—oh! I saw it all! That terrible man, Dirk, and that fellow that was here, Cranch, suddenly appeared in front of us. Although it was dark, the others seemed to know what Mackay was up to. Something in Dirk's hand flashed in the air, and Mackay dropped to the ground with a groan. It was horrible! . . ."

For a few seconds nobody spoke; then, recovering herself from the terrors of her recollection, the girl proceeded:

"After that, I was taken on here, where you found me. Nothing further happened, except regular bullyings whenever Westerby called. One night, however, I was brought to the mine again by Dirk, who threatened to leave me there in the dark. I entreated him not to; I even think I became hysterical. Eventually he relented, and brought me back.

"Then, thank goodness, you arrived! That is all."

Joan Lensker ceased, and for awhile there was a thoughtful silence amongst her listeners. Then Buxton spoke.

"By the way, Mrs. Lensker, did you ever hear of a woman called Madame Astra?"

"Madame Astra? A fortune-teller? Yes. I met her once. Michael took me there with him once when we first came from Sydney. She was some sort of relative of Michael's, and that is why he went to see her."

The detective forbore to comment upon the current belief as to what the relations between the two Russians were.

"And you have never seen nor heard from her since?"

"No."

"And your husband?"

"Not that I know of."

"I see . . . Now about this man in the mine you call Dirk. Is he a tall, sombre-looking man—a man that seems to brood a lot ? "

" Yes. That just fits him."

" And he lives in the house here ? "

" Yes. I think so."

" Thank you. Well, Hammie, this Dirk, as you might now have guessed, is your friend the chief Crown witness—known officially as Dick Haynes. Strange how that little error regarding his christian name should have crept in."

" Oh, nothing seems very strange now," commented the other grudgingly. " I'd believe it if you told me it was he who killed Lensker. But——"

" Oh, there are a few ' buts ' yet ; yet light is dawning," responded his colleague. " Still talking of christian names, however—Mrs. Lensker, did you ever get an inkling of what Westerby's front name was ? I see the paper gave his initials as H. A."

" I did hear Michael call him something once or twice—a strange name ; like ' Erewhon ' it sounded. I remembered it, because I read a book called that once, and it reminded me of it."

" Not Herivan ? " asked the big detective eagerly.

" That was probably it."

" I think so too. For that, according to my information, is the name of Michael Lensker's sworn enemy in Russia, the Bolshevik plotter, who has come to Australia for some nefarious purpose. It will be a good thing for the community when we have him safely out of the way. . . . I am afraid, Harding, that after what has happened to-day, it will be no good setting that suggested trap of yours in the mine tomorrow; but we can at least visit the place now, and see what is to be learned there. On the way there are a few telegrams to be dispatched. No doubt our old friend Pilkington will be willing to oblige us again."

Chapter XXVII *In the Deserted Mine*

THE telegrams which Peter Buxton had referred to as requiring dispatch were descriptions of Herivan Alexovitch, alias Westerby, and his associate Dirk Haynes. These were duly written out by the detective at the little Nullabong Flat Post Office, and were left with Postmaster Pilkington to be transmitted to Police Headquarters for general broadcasting throughout the State.

Buxton, however, was still thus engaged when Constable Malfy, acting in accordance with the wire sent him from the former prior to leaving the city upon his exciting motor chase, arrived from Dalesbrook in a hired car.

Cranch and his wife, still securely handcuffed, were duly handed over for removal to custody, while arrangements were made for Joan Lensker to be accommodated for a few hours by the good spouse of the postmaster.

While Hammond—who, for once, had been persuaded to accept one of his colleague's cheroots—and the two friends were idly discussing aspects of the case, seated comfortably in Hal Roach's car, Buxton—his writing finished—had a few words with Malfy, who was standing beside his machine.

" So you made a capture, too, Malfy," he remarked. " What sort of a man was he ? "

" A pale, undersized fellow, with a face like a half-baked scone," replied the constable. " Looked a little stupid, but can't get anything out of him. He was trying to peep in a back window of Westerby's house when I nabbed him. He seemed to think it part of the game."

" Hm ! I'll have a go at him as soon as I've got through here. Know anybody answering to the description the constable has just given ? " he asked, turning to Cranch, who was seated in the rear seat of the hired car, in full hearing of this conversation.

" No ! " was the gruff response.

" I don't suppose you would in any case," commented the detective. " Nothing doing at Westerby's house ? " he continued, addressing the constable.

" Nothing at all. I waited there until half-past four, in accordance with your instructions, and then came on here. Westerby never arrived."

" Very well, Malfy. If you come across the gentleman, or his—er—local manager, Haynes, arrest them. I have applied for a warrant for them both. That is all at present."

With that Buxton stepped into Hal Roach's car, and three minutes later the party of four were alighting alongside the workings of Nullabong Flat.

It was a matter of ten minutes experimenting before they could operate the big boulder which blocked the secret entrance to the old mine. At last, however, it swung back, and the four men entered the dark passage beyond.

Ralph Harding—as the only one with an acquaintance with the place—took the lead.

Each was equipped with candles obtained from the postmaster, while Ralph carried an electric torch which was part of the equipment of his friend's car.

After a steep descent, the passage suddenly emerged into a long " drive," which ran off at right angles in either direction.

Turning to the left, Ralph led along the passage until it opened out into a larger chamber.

"Here," he said, pointing, "was where I was held prisoner; you can see the ropes still there. And further along, against the right-hand wall, you can see those machines of which I spoke."

Eagerly the men pressed forward, and examined the objects of interest.

"Hm!" was Buxton's verdict at last. "A drill with burnisher, and a cutting machine. Besides a tiny lathe on the bench, vices and so on. All made for exceptionally delicate work. Looks almost like a jeweller's outfit. If our Bolshevik friends go in for making infernal machines they are produced with clockwork precision, I'll bet. But then, of course, they would have to be. Hullo, what's this?"

Reaching forward, the detective pushed up a small metal tray which had been half concealed behind some tools.

One of the objects upon it glittered exceedingly in the flickering light of the candles.

It was a diamond dress stud. Its sparkle reminded Ralph, with a queer shock, of his ghastly experience in the lift at Lombardy Chambers.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, in a strained voice, "I believe that's the very stud Lensker was wearing at the time I saw him!"

"Maybe it is," said Buxton calmly, "but

what are these other things, I wonder? Sleeve links—possibly Lensker's too—a couple of pearl necklaces, ruby ear-rings, a topaz pendant. They are not *all* Lensker's unless he was carrying them."

"Perhaps," suggested Hammond, who had now ceased to lodge objections to his colleague's theories, and was quite reconciled to the idea that neither Ralph nor Joan Lensker was the guilty party,—"Perhaps that was one way this Bolshevik crowd had of financing their show—by obtaining jewels, and realizing on them, I mean. Enthusiastic supporters might easily give their jewels rather than money and——"

"Or they might have a system for stealing jewels from people who were not enthusiastic supporters, eh? Anyhow, it would all be for the good of the cause, and bring grist to the mill. But—listen!"

Faintly down the corridor came the softest of sounds. Only a trained ear could have heard it. The next instant the place was flooded with light.

"Somebody coming!" was the detective's unnecessary comment. "Quick! Get behind this angle in the wall, and don't give them any warning."

Silently the four men, extinguishing their now unnecessary candles, crouched against the edge where the narrower passage entered the chamber.

Presently quick footsteps came to their ears, echoing louder and louder.

A man emerged into the chamber, walking straight over towards the bench and machines.

He stretched out his hand, as if to reach for some article there; then something seemed to warn him, and he turned.

He faced Buxton's levelled revolver, thirty feet away.

"It is he," whispered Ralph fiercely; "it's the man they called the 'chief.'"

"That's Westerby," added Hal Roach, whispering too, "the fellow I saw young Clarke talking to."

"Hands up, Herivan Alexovitch," cried the detective, in menacing tones; "I arrest you."

"What for?" came from the new-comer, in a steady, repellent voice, raising his hands, however. In spite of the sudden emergency which was thrust upon him, he appeared, for the nonce, quite master of himself.

"For complicity in the murders of Michael Lensker and Donald Mackay—besides one or two other matters."

The Russian's eyes strayed for a moment from the muzzle of the weapon pointed at him, and looked straight at Ralph Harding there. A look of hatred and rage suddenly transformed his face.

"The killer of Lensker you will never get!" he exclaimed fiercely; then, with a quick change of tone, "But wait, I will show you something."

With arms still extended above his head, he walked slowly down the chamber, away from the fascinated watchers.

Before he had gone a dozen yards Ralph divined his intention.

"Don't let him go any further," he cried; "he is making for the shaft."

"Stop!" commanded Buxton, but the Russian broke into a run. The others rushed forward.

The detective's revolver, aimed low, cracked twice. Alexovitch staggered, half sprawled, then recovered. Poised on the very edge of the pit, he faced his pursuers.

"Beware what fate awaits you!" he cried. Then, giving vent to a hideous, spine-freezing laugh, he twisted himself backwards and shot from sight.

For minutes, while the four men looked at each other aghast, the echoes of that horrible sound seemed to linger in the ghostly passages of the old mine.

Chapter XXVIII

A Secret for Two

THE morning newspapers were full of the "sensational developments."

Rarely is so much new light given on a case as that which appeared in the issues of Wednesday, 5th November. No doubt some of the editors thought it a pity to waste all that good news in the one number.

The papers, once starved for information, were now glutted.

Vivid accounts of the finding of Ralph Harding by Buxton; the former's experiences; the exciting chase in the motor-car from Melbourne to Nullabong Flat; the discovery of Joan Lensker, and the final tragic scene in the mine filled the all-too-small columns.

Startling allusions to a deeper significance for all these events appeared; one paper referred to the "seizure of illicit plant," and another to the "death of Bolshevik leader by his own hand."

The press was in its glory.

Matters had reached that stage where the detectives had decided to withhold practically nothing from the reporters. Very little indeed remained in doubt, and yet Buxton was puzzled.

His chief care was the whereabouts of Haynes, the accomplice in so many ill deeds. He seemed to have vanished entirely off the earth.

Then there was the suspicious man with the pale face who had been apprehended by Malfy. In spite of Buxton's confidence, he had been able to get nothing out of this fellow, who gave his name as Jones. Finally, a charge of loitering with intent was levelled against him. With that the detective had to be satisfied.

Generally speaking, however, matters were pretty well cleaned up. As Hammond said, "Westerby, or Alexovitch, by his action had confessed himself the murderer of Lensker and at the same time saved the authorities the trouble of hanging him." Only certain details as regards methods and motives were absent.

The public, the newspapers, and the authorities were all satisfied as to the results of the detectives' work to date.

Nearly every person in the State who could read was looking out for a man of the description of Dirk Haynes. His capture surely could not take very long.

* * * * *

Although the proceeding was irregular, Ralph, early on the morning that the papers had blazoned forth their news, was released for a few hours. Until certain formalities were complied with—and hurried steps were to be taken that afternoon — he was still nominally a prisoner held upon a grave charge. But such were the circumstances, and such was Ralph's anxiety to see a certain person, that special permission was granted for a taste of that liberty which was soon to be entirely his.

After the climax in the mine the previous afternoon, Hal Roach's car had been still much in demand; taking Buxton first to Dalesbrook and then finally the whole party to Melbourne—and Ralph once more to his solitary cell. Joan Lensker was fixed up temporarily at least, with a widow friend of Hal Roach's, whom the latter had got on the long-distance 'phone from Dalesbrook.

In the solitude of his cell, after the excitement of the day, Ralph's mind had time to revert to the conversation he had had with Hal Roach about Diana, and now it was with rather mixed feelings that he made his way down Hockley Road, Malvern.

However, he reflected, surely she had read the news in that morning's paper and—even if she had not done so before—must now believe him innocent.

He entered the gate of the Allison residence, and there, not five yards away, selecting blooms from a bed of standard roses, stood Diana. In her fresh morning gown, she set Ralph's pulses throbbing. Forgetful of his doubts he stepped forward eagerly, hat in hand.

Diana looked up, saw who her visitor was, and turned white. She shrank back a little.

"Why, Dee!" cried Ralph, in a voice in which there was pain. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Her dark eyes dropped beneath his searching look, then gradually colour crept back into her smooth cheeks, suffusing them with red.

An icy hand seemed to clutch at Ralph's heart while he waited for some response.

But Diana said nothing. With delicate, tapered fingers, she was picking at the roses in her hand, plucking them to pieces. Ralph felt as if it were thus his soul was being slowly torn and rent away.

"So it was true what I heard," he said at length bitterly. "Your love for me held no trust."

"Oh, Ralph!" burst out Diana at last. "Don't say that! I trusted you too much!"

"Too much! I have never failed any trust. Diana, this is Clarke's work, I know. He has been telling you things he had no right to. But he will have to reckon with me now. I am no longer a criminal, Diana. After to-day I am free."

"Cyril Clarke only told me what everybody else knew, and were cruel enough to keep away from me. The world knew of your—your perfidy, and I did not."

" My perfidy ! And I am innocent. Did you not see this morning's papers ? "

" Yes, but that does not affect what concerns me. Cyril Clarke dined with that man Lensker on—on that terrible night, and he told Cyril all about you and his pretty wife. Do you think that does not concern me ? "

The girl's eyes were flashing.

" Clarke should have little to say," retorted Ralph, " seeing he was a friend of Lensker's, so the detectives told me, and also of the man Westerby. He shall have some nasty questions to answer himself before the day is out ; and it was through him warning Westerby of my escape from his gang that our plans nearly went awry. That fact is regarded very seriously by the police."

Ralph let this remark sink in, for it was through the girl's impulsiveness that Clarke was able to act as he had done.

Some realization of this must have come to Diana, for when she spoke it was with an attempt to justify herself.

" Still, you had that woman in your office, when you told me that you were alone. If you——"

" Diana, I did not. If you choose to believe Clarke, a discredited witness, before me, well, that must be your own affair. He has been playing for his own ends all the while, from the time he rang me up that night to see if I was at the office, till now. I would not be surprised if he is deeply in this thing, too."

But a jealous woman's doubts still linger.

"You cannot deny," she persisted, "that it was through this woman—this pretty Mrs. Lensker—that you were dragged into this affair."

"No, I cannot."

"And everything you did, you did for her sake."

"Well, practically."

"Then why? What is she to you?"

"Dee, I told you, practically before it all started, that Mrs. Lensker was, in a sense, an —an employer of mine. I act for her."

"Your actions seem to have been unnecessarily—chivalrous."

"You would have done the same had you been I."

"That is natural. I would have been a man. And any pretty face——"

"Diana, be fair——"

"I am as fair as you deserve. I demand to know, if you have any love for me, what this woman is, or was, to you."

"Dee, of course I love you. But—I can't tell you more than I have."

"Then Madame Astra must have taken me for a fool, too."

Ralph stared blankly.

"Diana, what do you mean?"

"Oh, that woman came to me, and she told me all about you—and that other woman. 'Young and pretty she is! isn't she?' Well, Astra had the impudence to tell me that your feelings towards this Mrs. Lensker were like a brother's love for a sister."

"Did she—did she tell you that?" Ralph stammered.

"She did. And seeing you haven't got a sister—Ralph, this is impossible. You must tell me all, or—or——"

There was a sudden catch in the speaker's voice; and she ceased, as if she dared not trust herself to further speech.

For fully a minute there was silence, then very quietly Ralph spoke.

"Diana, Madame spoke truly, as usual. My love for Joan Lensker is as a brother for a sister. She *is* my sister—my half-sister."

Diana Allison's big eyes showed incredulous amazement.

"But—but—I always understood your father never married again."

Ralph bowed his head, while sorrow choked his voice.

"That is the trouble, Dee; that is why I have—been so secretive in this matter. He did not."

"Oh, Ralph," gasped Diana, as though with realization a world of remorse overwhelmed her, "how terrible! What a blind, stupid cat I have been!"

"You see," Ralph continued, "it was such a bitter secret, and I always swore to keep it. But now it is something we two must share."

Chapter XXIX *Madame's Last Hand*

MORE than a week had elapsed since a Nolle Prosequi had been entered against Ralph, and he had obtained his release.

He had taken up the strings at his office again, and had been welcomed back enthusiastically by his partner, Paydon, and the staff. The janitor, Burrowes, was the only man in the building who seemed at all unimpressed at seeing him again.

The worthy Mrs. Hicks of Cygnet Street, though doubtless glad to see her boarder back, managed to evince in her silent way that she had thought all along that his troubles had been of no class at all, and were bound to end happily.

Diana Allison, anxious to make up for her apparent lack of loyalty to her lover, showed her devotion in every possible way. To demonstrate to the world her confidence in Ralph, and to still any idle tongues that might yet be wagging, she insisted on Joan Lensker coming to stay with her. Soon the two became like sisters, which, in truth, they were destined to be.

Hal Roach seemed to find many excuses now for calling at the Allisons' home.

"Of course," he explained laughingly one day, "I am not trying to make Ralph jealous."

Other friends, such as the Fiseleys and the Martels, gathered round again; and doubtless many of them felt a little guilty at not having displayed a greater confidence in Ralph Harding's innocence earlier.

Cyril Clarke, after one rebuff, had not seen fit to call again; and in fact he had rather taken the place in people's suspicions which Ralph had held before.

So far, no trace of Dirk Haynes had been found, and Detective Buxton's puzzledom in this regard was proportionately increased. He had pondered over the last words uttered by Westerby before hurling himself into the pit—"Beware what fate awaits you." Whether this threat or warning referred to the insidious seeds of Bolshevism that had already been sown, or the more lurking and personal danger of a vengeful move by the sombre-looking man who had already been responsible for one murder, he did not know. Anyhow, Haynes continued to elude him, and no other developments occurred.

* * * * *

Late one afternoon—it was the Thursday of the week following his release—Ralph Harding received a ring on his office 'phone. It was from some one whom he least expected to hear —Madame Astra.

He had seen the lady but once since her memorable visit to his apartments, and that was only for a few minutes in the court when his application for release was being presented. Therefore, he was somewhat surprised when the speaker announced herself.

" Mr. Harding—Mr. Ralph Harding ? Good ! Madame Astra here," came the words. " I have something *verr'* important to see you about. Something *most* important. Can you come to my private house when you leave your office this evening ? You remember the address ? Yes, Albert Street. Thank you, Mr. Harding. Good. Good-bye ! " and Ralph was left wondering.

However, he decided to go at Madame's urgent request and see what this most important matter was. For a certainty it had something to do with the Lombardy Chambers mystery, and though he was clear of it all now, he wished to see everything in connection with the matter finally settled, then buried in oblivion.

On his way to catch an East Melbourne tram ten minutes later, strangely enough Ralph ran into Detective Buxton, smoking a cheroot on the corner of the street.

" Anything fresh ? " asked the latter genially, after smiles of greeting.

As no secrecy had been stressed in his conversation upon the telephone, Ralph told the detective of his mission.

" Ho, I wonder what's up now," mused the big man, puffing slowly at his weed. " She's a strange woman that. I'll tell you something. You remember that loitering person Malfy arrested on suspicion in Westerby's place at Dalesbrook ? Well, after his remand he tried to get bail. Guess who offered his security."

Ralph shook his head.

" No idea," he declared.

" Your friend Madame Astra. . . . Look here, old chap, I want you to promise me that whatever that woman tells you this evening, you will come and tell me."

The young man smiled.

" Certainly I will," he said, " as long as she does not first extract vows of fidelity from me. In that case——"

" In that case you must use your judgment, I suppose. Well, don't let me keep you any longer."

And the detective turned, and mingled with the crowd on the footpath.

* * * * *

Madame Astra did not take long to explain what she wanted.

" Mr. Harding," she commenced as soon as he was seated, " in the past I help you—or try to. Now you can help me. I think between us we can capture the murderer of Michael Lensker."

Her manner showed an eagerness which Ralph had not seen before in her.

" But," he responded wonderingly, " he is surely dead—at the bottom of the old mine-shaft."

" Ah ! Alexovitch, you mean ? But you are wrong, young man. I know too well he did not kill Michael. Yet wait. You assist me, and together we will get who did."

" How can I help ? " asked Ralph, non-committally.

" I ask you for two reasons," the other went on. " First, because I find my usual help is not—available, you call it. And the second is, that I can trust you—to be just as good. Now listen.

" I am setting a trap for this man we both want. He will come to this house to answer an advertisement. Read this."

The little woman handed over a folded newspaper, pointing to a marked paragraph. Ralph read :

> "FOUND, in suburbs, parcel containing three-cluster ear-rings and other jewellery. Owner may have same by describing. Apply between 6 and 7 p.m. to Reverend Henry Riddell, 715 Albert Street, East Melbourne."

"Who is the Rev. H. Riddell, who lives at your address ?" asked Ralph ; "and why should the murderer of Michael Lensker—if he has not already met his end—come in answer to this ?"

"Ah," replied the fortune-teller, her eyes gleaming, "if he reads that, he will come, there is no doubt ; and the reverend gentleman, Mr. Riddell, he is yourself."

"Myself ?"

"Yes. You will take the part of the Reverend Riddell, if you please, to-morrow evening, and receive—visitors."

"Hm ! But why not this evening ? That is this morning's paper."

"Ah, but the murderer of Michael Lensker is clever. He will not answer too quick, but wait to see if my bait looks like a trap. If this advertisement is repeated to-morrow, it will show that the Rev. Riddell is anxious, and that will make our man suspicious. But it will not be repeated, and to-morrow night I expect him to come. . . . Do you consent ?"

"Very good," said Ralph, "I do. I have a —small dinner party to-morrow night, but I am sure my friends will not mind my being a trifle late."

*   *   *   *   *

The next morning, Ralph Harding saw Detective Buxton, and reported what had transpired.

"Whatever game she is up to," commented the latter, "I think it is just as well that I should be on hand. You say she made no reference to police, or police assistance? Well, there shall be some close by, just the same.

"I know that part of Albert Street. There are gardens opposite Madame's house. Two of us will station ourselves there, and when a visitor arrives, we shall quietly stroll over. Take this whistle. If we are wanted, just blow it once, and we shall 'be right in.'"

The rest of that day Ralph passed in a mild simmer of excitement.

At half-past five he was at Madame Astra's house.

The little woman opened the front door herself, and ushered him into a side room.

"You had better—dress the part,"—she indicated a clergyman's frock-coat, collar, and one or two other items which lay upon a settee—"and put on this wig, and these spectacles—they do not magnify. Then you will—awake no suspicion."

"How will I know if the right man comes?" asked Ralph, commencing to don his disguise.

" Ah," she said. " I will know. I will not be far away."

" And the jewels," he continued. " How can I know the description ? "

" You may look at them all while you are waiting," replied she.

Presently all was in readiness. The " clergyman " moved to the front room of the house —which, strangely enough, now appeared not unlike a reverend gentleman's sanctum. A small table had been placed, with suitable books, etc., near the window, and here Ralph sat, with his back to the light.

Then Madame handed him a roughly-tied brown-paper parcel. Within was a plain wooden box about a foot long, and as he opened the lid Ralph was left gaping.

The contents gleamed and scintillated in a manner which dazzled the eyes.

Necklaces, armlets, tiaras, brooches, hair-slides, and rings—everything that the jeweller's art could conceive for the adornment of women and the ruination of man seemed there represented. Clustered stones shone in glittering splendour.

" What treasure chest is this ? " he gasped. " What——"

But the woman standing beside him, smiling with her inscrutable eyes at his amazement, held forth her hand.

"This," she said, "is what will bring him. This is a thing which nobody could forget."

From Madame Astra's fingers was suspended the most wonderful set of ear-rings which Ralph was ever likely to see. A brilliant combination of diamonds and emeralds in exquisite settings, the six droppers seemed to scatter gleams of colour this way and that with every movement imparted from the hand which held them.

"Grand, eh ?" she commented. "You could recognize those again ?"

"*Anybody* could," replied Ralph, his eyes feasting on the glorious creation before him, "but——"

"But it is six o'clock, and I must leave you to yourself," went on the other rapidly. "I do not think our friend will be long, if he comes at all. And I think he will come because once you have possessed a thing like this—you would not want to lose it, eh ? Ah, I hear a sound now."

To Ralph's ears there was no sound ; but looking through the half-drawn blinds, he could make out a figure slowly approaching the house up the short path from the street. He could not see the gardens opposite, but he guessed there were figures moving there, also.

Turning round again he found he was alone. Madame had either silently left the room by the open door into the passage, or—which under the circumstances seemed more likely—she had hidden herself behind some heavy curtains which hung from the end wall.

The next moment a bell rang, and a minute or two later a visitor was being ushered into his room by Madame's trim maid.

The new-comer was tall and bent—apparently a man about sixty. Beard and whiskers, streaked with grey, were on his face, while his hair was grizzled, but not ill-kept. He looked at Ralph critically for a few moments before speaking.

" Reverend Henry Riddell ? " he asked, apparently satisfied with the other's ecclesiastical garb. Fortunately he could not tell how Ralph's pulses were beating beneath.

" I am he," replied the pseudo-clergyman calmly. " Pray take a seat. What can I do for you ? "

" I have called in answer to your advertisement about some jewels you have found. They are not very valuable really, but——"

" Can you describe any of them, sir ? " asked Ralph.

His visitor proceeded to give a detailed description of the ear-rings which had so evoked the other's admiration. The latter watched the speaker narrowly, but could see no resemblance to anybody he knew. If this were the murderer of Michael Lensker, an entirely new factor had crept into the game. It seemed late in the day for that.

However, he had obviously seen the precious piece of jewellery before; and Ralph was beginning to wonder how long he was expected to prolong the conversation, when he noticed a movement on the far side of the room. Madame Astra had silently slipped into sight from behind the curtains, at the back of the mysterious visitor.

She flashed a significant glance at her conspirator.

"Where," Ralph went on, "did you lose them?"

"They may have been lost months ago," came the rather unexpected reply, "but only recently did I miss them."

At that moment, without warning, Madame Astra made a swift cat-like spring—surprising in one who had so little appearance of agility. Her hand shot out and grabbed the new-comer by the beard. With a wrench it was away, and the next instant the mass of grizzled hair on top followed.

With a gasp, Ralph recognized the man as the missing compatriot of Westerby—Dirk Haynes!

Both men leaped to their feet. It was difficult to say which was the more startled.

Then Haynes recoiled in horror. For poised before him, a malignant gleam in her eyes, a cruel curl to her lips, stood the little woman, a long naked dagger blade in her hand.

"Ha!" she hissed, "it was you who slew my brother, Michael. But you, too, shall die. This is what I have schemed for. And now I will have my revenge!"

Her hand rose to its full height above her head. The dagger glimmered wickedly. Haynes seemed fascinated, unable to move. He was held by two piercing black eyes which kept him spellbound.

It was then that Ralph acted. Springing forward, he was just in time to grab the demented woman's wrist as it commenced its fierce, downward stroke.

Then he fumbled for the police whistle which Buxton had given him; and while she struggled madly but ineffectively in his strong grasp, he blew one loud, penetrating note.

Chapter XXX *Conclusion*

RALPH HARDING was not so late at his dinner-party as he expected. In fact, he was reasonably up to time.

It was but a quiet affair at the Allisons' home, at which half a dozen young friends were present.

Of what had just transpired at Madame Astra's house he said nothing at first, but merely joined in the general chatter over the meal as if he had no other thoughts but of social amenities. Only Diana noticed that his manner contained suppressed excitement.

The other guests consisted of Hal Roach, who sat next to Joan Lensker; Jack Fiseley, and Phyllis Martel. The last-mentioned gay individual was full of a new "stunt" she had for entertaining her friends, before her mother's return from abroad. Most of her remarks were addressed to Jack Fiseley; but Ralph gathered that the entertainment was to start at three in the morning, and that the guests would be blindfolded. The thing seemed to tickle Jack's wild spirit, for he laughed enthusiastically at times. Some of Phyllis's ideas must have been —thrilling.

After dinner the six young friends took seats on to one of the lawns. The night was quite warm. The men, obtaining permission, smoked.

Diana and Phyllis lit cigarettes.

During one of those pauses, happy though silent, which often come in the conversation after the company has dined well, Diana spoke.

"Ralph, dear. I can see you have something to tell us. You have been saving it up all the evening. What is it ? "

Her fiancé smiled, luxuriously exhaling a cloud of cigar smoke before replying.

" I have," he admitted. " It is something that should interest you all—if Joan does not mind us talking about a matter which concerns her very deeply."

The girl referred to—looking sweet in a semi-evening dress of black—glanced up from a private conversation she was having with Hal Roach.

" I presume you are alluding to my late husband," she said. " I do not mind you talking about him at all. All that seems so—so far away now. Since I have been with you people "—and a little gush of gratitude filled her voice—" I have been living in a new world, a wonderful world. All that has passed cannot affect me any longer. You, Diana, and you others have been so good to me."

Diana Allison moved over, and put her arm affectionately around the other's shoulder.

" Not at all, my dear," she said softly, " you deserve everything that we can do for you. But go on, Ralph."

The young man, who had watched this little interplay with pleased eyes, continued :

" Well," he announced, " this evening I witnessed the arrest of another murderer of Michael Lensker."

"What's that?" gasped Hal Roach, while the rest of the company just stared at the speaker.

"I mean, that the missing man, Haynes, has been captured."

"And you saw it all?"

"Yes." And Ralph gave an account of his latest dealings with Madame Astra—which ended in the apprehension of the missing man by Buxton and Hammond.

"Oh, how thrilling," cried Phyllis Martel ecstatically, clasping her hands. "And to think that I was the first of you all to meet Madame Astra!"

"I would not," Ralph counselled the company, "repeat anything of the stabbing part of the affair I have just told you about, as I do not know what action the police intend taking. However, they are quite certain of their course with Haynes."

"What do you mean," asked Jack Fiseley, for once showing seriousness, "by saying that he was *another* murderer of Michael Lensker?"

"Well, so many of us have been suspected, haven't we? First of all there was you yourself, Jack—together with Hal. Next, I, as you know, was blamed. And Joan, too, was suspected. Madame Astra herself came in for a share of suspicion—I believe that was your idea, wasn't it, Jack? Or was it Hammond's? Even

Burrowes, the janitor at Lombardy Chambers, had cause to feel alarmed at his part in the affair. Then, near the finish this Bolshevik, Alexovitch—or Westerby—is concluded to be the murderer.

" Yet, to-night, a man is arrested whom Madame Astra—and she generally seems to be right—maintains is the real perpetrator. He is already a murderer, as we know.

" But I have another little surprise for you. Detective Buxton has got some theories of his own that just require some proof, which he expects to get to-night. He promised me, before I left him this evening, to call here and tell us the results. He should arrive any moment now, and then we shall have first-hand information about everything. Wasn't my news worth keeping a little ? "

Everybody agreed that it was ; and before the excited chatter consequent upon Ralph's announcement had died down, a taxi-cab drew up in the street outside.

" This must be he now," said Ralph, as presently a dark figure strode up a path towards the chairs. Sure enough, it was.

A few minutes later Detective Buxton, smoking one of his interminable cheroots, was comfortably seated amongst the young people.

" Well," he announced cheerily, after the usual banal preliminaries, and gazing round at the small group in the gloom, " you will all be pleased to hear that everything is over—we have caught the right man this time."

" So Haynes did actually kill Michael Lensker then ? " asked Ralph.

" Yes. His finger-prints correspond with some of those found in the lift ; and there is ample other evidence. Besides, he has confessed everything. Madame Astra must have hypnotized him."

" She seems to have a wonderful way of getting at the truth."

" Not always so wonderful as it might appear upon the surface. We have made a discovery or two about her. Since both she and Dirk Haynes have ' opened out ' to me, I may claim to know all that is to be known about these cases.

" That man whom Malfy arrested at Dalesbrook—whom Madame Astra offered to go bail for—is in her pay, a sort of inquiry agent in her fortune-telling business. It was he who told her about you being captured by me at Nullabong Flat—'phoned it to her, on the long distance. It seems that Jones—let us call him that, seeing he calls himself it—was making investigations at the Flat before I was, really. He managed to overhear our conversation in the room off the Post Office. So that was that."

" By Jove ! " ejaculated Ralph, " and I guess it was Jones who accounted for her sudden disappearance from my rooms the night Madame visited me."

" Yes. She had him posted outside, with pre-arranged signals in case the police were about. She did not want to be seen consulting with you at that juncture."

" No, I don't suppose she did. But the police must have been about, then ? "

" Only Tate and Sheridan—the two constables you met on the night of your hold-up. We had them posted there, just to stroll about and keep their eyes open ; for you, of course, very early appeared as an object worthy of our investigations. But that midnight attack on you puzzled us as much as no doubt it puzzled you. It was one of the first things which made me consider the possibility of gang work or some new agency behind everything.

" No doubt, when I listened to your story at Nullabong Flat, after your escape from the mine, you thought I accepted it very readily for an incredulous detective. But I had previously discovered something pretty tangible, which rather supported your case."

" What was that ? "

" I'll explain. First of all I reckoned that Haynes knew more than he told us. I suspected that man of being connected closely with the affair, though I let on to nobody. He nearly put himself away when I showed him the diamond Malfy had found in Mackay's mouth. And those old workings seemed a funny place for him to be grazing a horse upon.

" What really set me thinking was the fact that everything seemed to be made to point directly against you. Your hat being left about —that was too obvious. And when I found a couple of dead matches right at the spot where this hat had been found, it showed fairly plainly that the hat had been put there."

" How's that ? " asked Hal Roach, who was an attentive listener.

" Well, if the matches had been struck by some one looking for the hat, they were so close to it that their light must have revealed its presence. They were struck by somebody searching for a suitable spot to leave the incriminating evidence.

" The absence of Mackay's hat—and my subsequent finding of it—were also strong ' pointers.' It seemed a stupid thing for Mr. Harding to take away a hat two sizes too small for him ; and when I mentioned, in Haynes's presence, that I must find Mackay's hat or search every inch of the old workings for it, I noticed his face. It revealed the tiniest trace of concern. Next morning I found the missing hat, in a place where I should have noticed it the previous evening had it been there.

"That business of juggling the hats—as I hinted to my colleague, Hammond, at the time—was most important, and that is where the gang made one of their greatest mistakes. For, when the hat was replaced, I became reasonably certain that a further search of the flat by me was not wanted by Haynes, for one.

"All this time, however, and for some while afterwards, there was nothing to show that Haynes was not working in conjunction with you—whether guilty or innocent—for facts were still vague. It struck me then that there might have been two parties working against one another behind all the occurrences.

"What told much in your favour, Mr. Harding, was—as I said before—the fact that everything looked too much against you. If you had stabbed Mackay so near to those open shafts, why in the name of all that is reasonable did you not drop the body down one of them? That was what puzzled me a lot, for it would have taken much less intelligence than you possess to have seen that, had the body been so disposed of, the murder would probably never been heard of.

"So you see, with all these thoughts in my mind, I was quite ready to believe your story, which fitted in so nicely with facts known to me, and removed certain points of doubt. Moreover, that very afternoon, while the inquest was in progress at Dalesbrook, I took the liberty of visiting Mr. Haynes's house. Unfortunately, I did not look in the barn.

" However, my visit was informal—nobody noticed it, in truth. I merely went to examine Mr. Haynes's wardrobe, and amongst it I found a coat. On that coat, a button was missing. One which I had found in the cuff of Mackay's trousers matched the others.

" My facts, as you can realize, were getting pretty tangible, and were quite enough to support the independent testimonies of both you and Mrs. Lensker. So much for that lot."

" One moment, Mr. Buxton, if you please," put in Diana Allison, who had been hanging on the detective's words. " You say things were deliberately made to point against Ralph—Mr. Harding. Why should those people try to do that ?—what was the object ? "

" This. It was a subtle scheme on the part of the gang—or Westerby, rather. He supplied most of the brains of the show. Mr. Lensker had been murdered—by his crowd—but Mr. Harding was in a very suspected position in that regard. If a second murder could be absolutely brought home to Mr. Harding, then every one would believe him guilty of the first, and Westerby would never need to worry about continued investigations which might eventually cause him trouble. Such investigations would naturally cease when Mr. Harding was acclaimed guilty.

" That Mr. Harding should never have a chance of defending himself was also part of their plan. Eventually the idea was to make away with him, leaving his body where it could be found. Thus, with the discovery of the corpse of the accepted murderer, the whole matter would have automatically come to an end."

" What devils those Bolsheviks must be ! " murmured Diana, shocked at the fate which had been prepared for her lover.

" Ah, there you have referred to something which has caused the greatest surprise of all," stated the detective. " For the whole thing was in no way connected with a Bolshevik plot. It was a—a movement of quite a different description."

" What ! " gasped Ralph. " But the whole thing reeked of Russianism."

" Yes, true. But it was not a political outrage, as it were."

" Then for once Madame Astra was wrong ? "

" No ! Though her information about Alexovitch made things look that way, she never definitely stated he was here on a Bolshevik mission. And it is through Madame Astra that the real truth of it all has at last been revealed. A funny part of it is that she had the key to the mystery in her hands all the while, and did not realize it till a couple of days ago."

"Then—what *is* the meaning of it all?"

Dead silence claimed the little group of listeners on the lawn, while the detective replied:

"A semi-international jewel stealing gang, of which Alexovitch was head. He blackmailed Lensker into joining it. Your unconscious part, Mrs. Lensker, was to cultivate a love of display in others, and to help your husband move in circles where he could spy out prizes. Those infernal machines of yours in the mine, Mr. Harding, are a jewel-setter's plant utilized by the gang for altering the appearance of the stuff they got hold of. Much of it was practically re-made down there."

"What was the key to the mystery, of which you spoke?"

"That box of jewels which you handled this evening, Mr. Harding. It seems that Lensker, unwilling as he was to act with Alexovitch, *was* a traitor to him—early in the game. That little lot of jewellery was appropriated by him from the gang's stores, and left for safe keeping with Madame Astra—who, as perhaps you did not know, turns out to be his sister. No wonder she took such an interest in his affairs.

"She was ignorant of the contents of the package. It was just 'something she was minding' for Lensker. Apparently it was months before the gang discovered the loss. And then the trouble started."

"That collection of trinkets was the mysterious thing for which both you and Mrs. Lensker were subjected to such torture by Westerby, and his satellites."

"I don't wonder," remarked Ralph, "that the gang were anxious about them. The lot must have been worth thousands. But that does not yet explain why Michael Lensker should be in Lombardy Chambers on the night of his death, though it seems to account for everything else."

"Now we come somewhat into the realm of speculation," replied the detective. "But I fancy I have got the matter to rights. Your husband, Mrs. Lensker, was beyond doubt an unreasonably jealous man. He had learned of your correspondence with Mr. Harding, and his visit to Melbourne was solely for the object of 'having it out' with your—er—Melbourne agent. We have young Clarke's testimony to that effect, which I believe is quite true. Lensker was in a very nervous and upset state at the time, and did not see things in their right light.

"However, the gang—having by now missed the jewels—were watching Lensker's movements. When he went to the city—on a mission, you understand, absolutely unconnected with the gang's operations—they became suspicious, and followed him. The rest you can just about guess."

"So Haynes actually aimed the fatal blow ?"

"Yes. Just as Lensker stepped into the lift. And he used the same instrument with which he subsequently killed Mackay—one of a set of two paper-knives which had belonged to his first victim. It had been taken by Alexovitch from your house only a few days previously, Mrs. Lensker."

"Those men seemed to show remarkable audacity in the building," commented Hal Roach, "and they didn't appear to hurry over-much."

"That is so. Cranch, of course, was stationed inside the street door, armed with a revolver to guard against interrupters. Yet they got cause for alarm. Suddenly, upstairs, came the sound of footsteps—they must have been yours, Mr. Harding. Alexovitch and his friends took them for those of the caretaker or janitor, and they did not know how much that person might have seen. That accounts for the mysterious bribe which was sent to Burrowes as a price for his silence, and which puzzled the recipient as much as others at the time."

"You referred to Cyril Clarke a few moments ago—did he actually have anything to do with this gang of jewel thieves?" asked Jack Fiseley, who was just as much wrapped up in the detective's revelations as the others.

"Only in much the same way as Mrs. Lensker," responded Buxton, "a sort of innocent tool. Lensker, who was a charming man, used such acquaintances as Clarke for getting shown about. After Lensker's death, Alexovitch—as Westerby—whom Clarke knew as a friend of the dead man, kept the acquaintanceship up for reasons of his own. When Clarke heard that Mr. Harding had been apprehended, he was so full of the news that he rushed off to tell Westerby, thinking he would be vitally interested. He was, but not in the way Clarke thought."

"So—so he wasn't one of the mob, then?" said Hal Roach sadly. He seemed quite disappointed to think that the young man, for whom he had so little time, was not to be caught in the legal net which young Clarke had been so glad to see surround his friend.

"No," the detective replied smiling, "he was just an unwitting accessory. I am afraid I cannot oblige you by arresting him. Though, from what I can gather, he probably deserves it."

"Oh," put in Ralph Harding, rather brutally, "Clarke was more of a fool than a rogue always." Then as if suddenly regretting a subject which might have caused Diana pain—which, indeed, it did—he abruptly asked:

"What could that man Alexovitch have meant by his final words in the mine, Mr. Buxton—'Beware what fate awaits you'?"

"Ah," the big man answered, "I suppose that we shall never know."

"Perhaps," suggested Hal Roach, "he was speaking to himself."

* * * * *

The detective had gone, and two of the guests also had taken their departure.

Four young people remained on the lawn of the Allison home, but two of them—Hal Roach and Joan Lensker—had strolled somewhat apart.

Ralph Harding and Diana sat close together in the comfortable deck-chairs.

"Isn't it wonderful," breathed Diana, breaking a few moments' silence, "how everything has turned out after—after all?"

"Yes, indeed," agreed Ralph, "and I have some further good news for you, my dear. In spite of—er—business interruptions, things have progressed so well at the office lately that our engagement can be announced just as soon as you like."

"Oh, you marvellous man," exclaimed the girl, turning and giving her lover a warm impulsive kiss upon the cheek. "But——"

"But what, Dee?"

"You know that I only like short engagements."

"Yes, my dear. I have considered that."

"Ralph, darling. . . . Oh, my dear, I trust I never cause you any worry again. I was a little brute in the past."

"No, you were not," protested the other loyally.

"Yes, I was—or nearly was. After all Madame told me, too. She is a wonderful woman that. And I nearly spoilt everything. But I promise——"

"I'll promise you something. You know, Dee, nearly all our trouble was caused by my working back at the office that night—callous business man that I was—instead of being where I should have been, with you. I'll promise—you know, after—that I shall not desert my dear wife at night for all the offices in the world."

Diana laughed happily.

"That is one of the best resolves a man ever made," she said, "and I shall see that you never want to break it!"

THE END

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